

CANCER PATHWAYS  
CANCER Writing  
Contest  
UNWRAPPED

**2023 Edition**

A collection of heartfelt  
stories written by teens  
facing cancer.

Over the past 22 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) 22nd year, and we remain committed to changing the world for those facing the impact of cancer.

Visit us online at: [www.cancerpathways.org](http://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 7,000 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.

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# 2023 Winning Essays

## Though You May Wander, I'll Always Be Right Here by Olivia

*12th grade, Ohio  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

July 19, 2013:

604,800...799...798...797... That can't be it, can it? Only 604,796 seconds left? I hadn't even known about the cancer diagnosis until a week prior, so how is it that she was already dying? The waiting room was deafeningly silent as I wrestled with these thoughts. I stared blankly ahead, not quite seeing anything, but hearing the grandfather clock in the waiting room shamelessly steal my mother's life away. Tick tock, tick tock. The nurse had told me to say my goodbyes while my mom was still conscious, but I couldn't move myself from the uncomfortable plastic chair that had kept me grounded throughout all the bad news. Everything was moving too fast, and I felt tears prick the corners of my eyes as the static around me increased. One more week.

604,668...

July 23, 2013:

259,200 seconds: They were inducing her into a coma that afternoon, and though I'd been avoiding it, it was time to say goodbye. Walking into that room was the hardest decision of my life, and once I saw my mom, made of wires and tubes, I felt like I had made a mistake. The woman lying on the bed was a sunken shell of a person, not the easygoing mother I had come to know, so I turned away. I couldn't do it. But then I heard a small, croaking voice whisper my name, and I knew that I couldn't waste the last moments I would ever have with her. I was never told how to react in a situation like this, so I just sat with her for what felt like hours, staring at the parking lot below. It was a while before she mustered up the strength to utter her final words. I closed my eyes, expecting a short declaration of her love, but what I got instead was something I'll never forget:

No need to wonder, don't ever fear  
Though you may wander  
I'll always be right here, right here  
You're more than one in a million  
No one can take your place  
Though I could try  
There's no way that I could ever forget your face

Even though her voice was shaky and strained, I recognized it immediately as the song she had sung for me every night before bed. I laid down in her arms and listened to the final verses reverberate softly in her chest. I knew this was the end, so as the last verse ended, I finally let my tears fall.

July 26, 2013:

0 seconds: I had been sitting outside for the better part of two hours, watching the moon slowly sink towards the horizon. The Weather Channel had predicted a beautiful day, but how was that fair? My own mother had just flatlined directly in front of me, and there wasn't even a single cloud to break up the vastness of the night sky. I had run outside shortly after the piercing tone of the heart monitor was shut off, and so far, no one had come out to comfort me. For the first time in my life, I felt 100% truly alone. That's when a warm light slipped through the cracks between my fingers, and I looked up as the last gift from my mom cascaded over me like a golden waterfall. A painting of orange and pink streaks surrounded me in the most beautiful sunrise I had ever seen, and I realized that even though I may be hurting in the moment, everything would turn out okay.

## Luck by Braylyn

*12th grade, New Hampshire  
Personal Diagnosis*

Let's say you're walking along the beach, not expecting to find anything really, and then, between your toes, you pull up from the sand a lavender coin, a sand dollar. Something once full of life is now trapped in a world where it's looked at as a symbol of luck, an object of rarity. Why is it until something is dead that we then correlate a bigger meaning with it? Why is it that in order to find good clarity with something it has to be gone? On November 15th 2020, when I was 15 years old, I was diagnosed with Follicular Thyroid Cancer. Out of the 7.6 billion people in the world, only 1-2% of them get diagnosed with

thyroid cancer. With this 1-2%, only 12% of people are diagnosed with the follicular strand.

“You’re lucky you have this type of cancer. It’s one of the good ones. It could be worse,” everyone would say to me, but only one of those 18 words would stick with me: luck. How lucky is having cancer? How is having cancer the best case scenario? Spending days and weeks inside the same four white walls. Continuously walking the same everlasting hallways, winding right and left in the abiding maze of the hospital. Often I would pass sick kids in a much worse condition than I was in. It’s a good thing I’m lucky though, right? What if I wasn’t lucky enough to beat it though? Diets, chemotherapy, MRIs, IVs, screens, needles. None of this is what luck felt like.

The thought of mortality often disrupted the serenity of my mind. Everything I knew from when I was a little kid seemed like a lie. Growing up I believed becoming a teenager was to get your license, hang out with friends, start a job, have your whole life to plan. Instead I was sitting in a cold gloomy room getting pricked over and over again, the numbness from my veins slowly grasping towards my heart as I lost all hope. All of this to get samples to see how much my tumor had spread. “It’s taken over your thyroid glands, but you’re lucky it hasn’t spread to your vascular system; we’re going to have to take blood once every week to see how your body is adapting.” Just like that my routine changed. From going to school everyday, playing sports, hanging out with friends, to being isolated. I felt as if I was a test subject, there for the amusement of the doctors, there to just get more data on my lucky situation.

“After looking at the MRI data it shows you don’t have to go through chemotherapy, if you choose to go through with the treatment your luck of getting other cancers later in life is increased.” Now I have to pick what happens to me? I was just told I was dying from the inside out, and now I have to make a decision on how the rest of my life plays out. My life has been checkup after checkup, blood work after blood work, these appointments used to make me feel belittled like I was weak and vulnerable, but now I find peace in it. I would often think about what my life could have been, but this is my life, this luck has made me who I am today. I often find myself as that same sand dollar, swept up by the ocean currents being given a second chance at life. I find myself realizing tomorrow isn’t promised, and to never take opportunities for granted. When I’m submerged in the crashing waves, my luck brings me back to shore as I wait for my next adventure.

## Enter the Tornado by Bree

*12th grade, Tennessee  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

When I was just ten years old, my mother was first diagnosed with cancer. It was the first time I had known someone intimately with the disease, and it was terrifying to me. I told people for many years to come that the scariest moment of my life was the instant I knew I might lose my mother to cancer. Through her first bout with the disease, my mother underwent strong radiation and multiple surgeries in her neck area. She was forced to use a feeding tube for many months, and I often found the disgusting task of dumping out her phlegm fell to me. Although the cancer was stage three, the doctors found it was relatively treatable, and within the next year, she was cancer free, if much skinnier and downright exhausted most days. She had survived, and my bright and lively mother soon returned to me. I could not be more thrilled, and we spent the next five years working to strengthen our relationship, as it could be tenuous at times. I am so grateful I was given those golden years with her, bumpy though they may have been. Most exciting to us, however, was that her specialists informed us there was little to no chance that cancer would return. She was expected to be in remission for a long time, but it was not to be.

In June 2020, my mother was re-diagnosed with cancer. This time it was stage four, and it was aggressive. She was given only eight months to live, and I didn't know what to do with myself, I felt stuck with nowhere to turn. She lived eleven more months, but her existence for the last two could hardly be considered "living". As a result of the number of painkillers she was on, she could barely move, speak, or even recognize my face. When I first told people that the scariest moment of my life was when I thought I would lose her, never did I question all that might come before. The last time that I saw her face, her eyes hollow and vacant, is an image that will haunt me for the rest of my life. Premature death can never be prepared for, at least not fully. People live longer in the twenty-first century than they ever have before, and so parents and grandparents are expected to live long and full lives. But then the demon called cancer arrived, and for my mother, that life ended. On a sunny Wednesday afternoon, I found out that losing the most important person in my life was nothing like the movies. It did not start raining, there was no moment where everything just stopped, no slow motion or blurry black and



white landscapes. I had experienced a great and fun-filled day at school and was planning on calling my mom to tell her all about it afterward. Death, and grief's subsequent arrival, are quiet but sudden, rushing in all at once when I realized that I was still here, and the person that I loved most had moved on without me. It has taken years of coping and healing to get where I am today, but the grief has taken a toll on my motivation and my happiness. While I am doing much better than I was immediately following her passing, I still have a long way to go on the road to peace.

Grief is something that dogs me each day. It is the stone in my chest when I wake each morning, the dull pain I feel when I hear her favorite song. Even when I think that I have escaped its clutches, I see just the wrong thing and it sucks me back in again. Grief is not five stages, not a process that I have been moving through systematically, but rather a tornado, alive, moving, and violent. As I make my way to the top, I begin to let my mother go, but then I will think I see her in public or hear her voice, and I am right back down at the bottom of the tornado again. I have begun to avoid certain events, topics, places, and even movies, and music, for fear that the reminder of my mother will be too painful for me to handle in public.

The worst part about being chained to grief, that foul, vicious creature, is how it has changed the way I interact with other people. More than ever before, grief has convinced me that everyone I love is going to leave me sooner or later, that they are all going to give up on me and move on to better things. I know that I am loved, and I know this is not true, yet I still believe and act upon this lie that grief tells me every day, doing everything I can to keep everyone together, happy with me, and keep my life under control. Whenever I feel that someone may be moving on from being in my life I panic and do all I can to convince that person to stick around, even if moving on is in both of our best interests.

I have been told that with time, the demon of grief will loosen its hold and one day set me free. However, through observation and experience, I have come to find that it never really lets us go, but rather the captive adjusts to its presence. I can only hope that I will learn to do the same in time. I hope that my story and experience with the disease will remind others that they are not suffering alone and that there are other people who have been in their shoes. There is a special type of connection and solidarity between people that lose their parents to cancer, and I have found many of them over the years. We lift each other up in a unique way, the reminder that we are not alone and that we must fight together for the next generation of children.

To honor my mother, I joined my school's 2022 Relay for Life Committee. My mother loved Relay, and it was one of her favorite events to attend, as it was one of the only times that she was properly appreciated for her fight. I was at first nervous about joining the committee, as I had skipped the year earlier when her death was still fresh.

However, I knew that if it powered through, I would help a lot of people, not just myself, and that was what finally convinced me. The experience was incredibly cathartic,

hearing the stories of survivors and those battling cancer. I led the survivorship branch of the event and was able to share my story with the dozens of survivors that attended. It was a truly healing experience for me, one I will cherish for years to come.

## Learning to Live Again by Kendal

*12th grade, Rhode Island  
Personal Diagnosis*

“You have alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma.” My new team of nurses was huddled behind my doctor as she told me. “Will I lose my hair?” I asked the doctor, praying for the answer to be no. I was always complimented on my long, auburn hair. I’ve seen those kids on television; I don’t want to look that frail. “Yes,” my doctor sadly replied. I sat still for a moment with my mother by my side. “Am I going to die?” I asked shakily, hardly knowing the meaning of those words. After a moment, my doctor answered. “It’s possible.” I didn’t cry when she responded. I didn’t even cry for the weeks after. I was just utterly numb. On November 22, 2014, I was diagnosed with a terminal form of stage four cancer. I was ten years old at the time, and for the first time, I truly understood what it meant to be a dead man walking.

My diagnosis devastated my family of six. My home was now split into two, my three older sisters at home with my father while he provided for us, then my mother and I at Hasbro Children’s Hospital. Within the first week, I had a port surgery and my first round of chemo. They told my parents I wasn’t going to make it. No words can describe how it feels to grow up in a hospital. Your brain is altered when you’re surrounded by death for your whole childhood. Growing up feeling like you’ll die at any moment and wondering when you can just feel like a kid again. I spent four months straight in the hospital after my diagnosis. Once I was stabilized, I had a schedule that consisted of one week home, two weeks inpatient treatment, repeat. Unfortunately, there were many kids in my situation as well. Fortunately for me, I am an extrovert, so I befriended almost all of them. We would do arts and crafts in the rec center, squirt syringes filled with water at nurses, and sometimes paint our handprints on the wall. They quickly made my hospital feel like home. I used to be excited about going back for treatment because I would have so many friends there too. Sadly with time, my friend group of about twelve kids dwindled to just two.

When I was diagnosed a second time, I was more confused than anything. I didn’t understand that remission didn’t mean cured. The doctors explained to my parents that people don’t survive a rediagnosis with a persistent and rapid cancer like Sarcoma. I cried a lot this time. I had told myself since my first diagnosis that it would be okay to die, but being faced with this possibility again after just a few months of being in

remission hurt me more than anything I could explain. I felt so close to being a kid again, but I suppose I didn't have that privilege. Then, one night, I recognized someone on the floor. It was my only surviving friend. We made eye contact and hugged each other. We were around twelve at the time and didn't have any interest in talking about cancer with each other, but this time was slightly different. I had asked him what he was doing here since we both went into remission around the same time. Then he told me he was re-diagnosed. This is when I first asked him what type of cancer he had. He told me it was also a subtype of sarcoma. That was the first time I realized we were indeed in it together. I have a vivid memory of me and him painting my mother's face like a Ninja Turtle while we watched the movie Pixels. It was a new release on hospital television. After we got bored with the movie, we got our nurse to get us giant syringes and had a water fight. This was the first time we were given the nickname 'Double Trouble.' We surely lived up to the name, constantly causing a ruckus in the hospital halls. When he was there, I felt a little less alone.

The third time I was diagnosed, I was about 13. The doctors told my parents it was almost guaranteed I would die. My entire family was in complete despair, except for me. I thought, surely this is it for me. Considering I was supposed to die at the age of ten, I wasn't too upset. My brain had already been rewired. I knew I was just not living but dying. However, dying isn't too different from living if you're doing it right. I was simply at peace with my life. I had good friends and family, and if I was to go. This is the way I wanted to do it. Sadly, my mood soon changed. I was sitting with my Aunt Patty; she was visiting town looking for a house to move into when my mother came up the stairs. That's when she told me my friend had passed away the night before. I didn't speak; I didn't cry; I didn't even move. My mother asked if I was okay, and I replied 'fine.' She said I was worrying her because of my reaction, but I knew if I reacted, that meant I was truly alone now.

The fourth time I was diagnosed was a blur of pain. Your parents can't teach you to grieve for someone else, nevermind help you grieve the person you once were. I used to be able to withstand the pain of treatment because I had many things to distract me, but this time around, I refused. I didn't want to get close to people if they would all die in the end. It was tough, but friends outside the hospital visited me a lot more, getting me to play games and watch movies. I don't think I would have made it through without them.

My fifth and hopefully final diagnosis, I was utterly lost. Every time I was re-diagnosed, the doctors would give me an estimated death date, but they have not even gotten it close. This time they told me that if I didn't die, I would be paralyzed. I was around sixteen at the time, and I told my doctor, "If I am going to be paralyzed, then you should just let me die now." At this point, I had spent my entire childhood living for my treatment, but this was my breaking point. I wanted to have treatment to live and for me, being paralyzed just wasn't on my quality of life to-do list. I made them find another way,

and they did. I had a very risky major surgery where the doctors placed two metal rods and nine screws in my back. Just like I had hoped for, I survived and could walk. After a grueling amount of physical therapy, I looked like your average kid again, and I was never happier.

often wonder what my life would have been like had I not spent my childhood in a hospital. Would I have been able to attend public school more regularly? Would I play sports or dance? Would I be a whole different person? I'll never know the answers to any of these questions but I do know on November 22, 2014, I was diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer, but today I am still alive. I have an overwhelmingly positive outlook on the world and made many friends and great connections along the way. It has now been seven years, seven months, and twenty-eight days since my estimated death and every day I am learning that the world is much more promising than it seems. If you put it in the right perspective, living like you're dying isn't so different from living.

## No Hope by Owen

*12th grade, Massachusetts  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

The phone rang. The world stopped. The car kept going.

Trapped in the backseat I could not see her face.

She looked at him.

Not me.

He froze.

His jaw clenched tight.

Fear.

Trapped.

His eyes did not meet hers again for days. His faith shredded.

She grew formal. She clawed in her bag for a scrap of paper. Dug deep in the armrest for a broken pen. Teeth out. Head bent, she scribbled. Back arched in a circle of pain.

I searched the window for a reflection to read her face.

There were no tears, but fear sat where happiness once lay in her eyes.

She was scared. Darkness crept in. She looked at him searching for recognition and understanding, asking him for help in a conversation he could not hear, but he knew every word.

She straightened. Her eyes reclaimed the road. I watched, hearing nothing as her hand grazed her long hair. She nodded in imperceptible agreement. Her hand with the broken pen touched her forehead, eyes closed, she reached for him. The call ended. Parking the car with one motion, he ran to her. Opening her door, she fell from her seat into his arms. Instantly, I was by her side. They wouldn't let go of each other, ever.

My words felt underwater. She couldn't hear me. My brother took a step backward.

Away.

I asked.

I asked again.

She turned to me and the blue in her eyes had changed. Forever.

There were storms. A cloud hung over her.

Threatening.

Menacing.

I saw pain, but the fear was gone.

I did not see hope.

I saw anger.

I saw command.

I saw resolve.

I saw strength.

It was a Sunday. We were outside a restaurant perched in a neighborhood very far from home. The sky grew heavy with gray.

And the words rained down.

My mom has stage 4 metastatic colon cancer.

Mom was in the middle of treatment when the quarantine quieted the world, however the presence of her cancer rang louder and louder in my ears. She had massive tumors in her colon and lung with a 14% chance of survival. She was only 45. Dad was focused on work and her care, so my responsibilities for my younger brother, pets, meals and laundry increased tenfold. We had limited outside help. The pandemic loomed over the world, but for those of us facing cancer, home was a struggle.

I remember sitting in my bed alone, thinking about her and how she could be gone forever. She couldn't hold cold things, she was always in pain, and her hands were covered with blisters. She had "first bite syndrome" where eating felt like an electric shock in her mouth and throat. I'd watch her wait for it to pass. It's the most helpless

feeling. Mom had long, curly hair and I picked it up and threw it away whenever I could so she wouldn't see it. Hollow holes sat where her smile once lit up her face. She ended up in a wheelchair after thirty weeks of chemo, six weeks of daily radiation and the loss of parts of four major organs. Inside, I was slowly crumbling.

I realized that I had to pull myself together, but when you find yourself in a situation like this, knowing where to reach and what to hold on to isn't easy. I first thought about all the reasons why I shouldn't be worried. For example, "My Mom is really tough" or "We caught it early." The trouble is, despite the fact that she's really tough, they didn't catch it early. She had no signs that the cancer was growing inside of her for what doctors estimate was 8-10 years because she looked so fit and healthy. Guilt swam in my head for weeks whenever I began to forget the grief I was feeling. Distraction is, essentially, forgetting grief.

I cried when no one was looking. I looked for hope in the darkness, but it didn't find me, and I didn't find it. Gifts flooded our house covered in the word hope. Hope. It became my least favorite word. I didn't want to hear hope or see hope. I refused to hope that my mom beat cancer. Hope felt meaningless. It still does. Hope is an excuse. Hope is a desire, and its fluffy-unicorn sense of maybe has no place for those needing action. It's for people on the sidelines of a sporting event. Cancer isn't about hope.

Feeling powerless, I started running daily before my zoom classes. In May 2020, I founded a 5k training company, "Running UP," inspiring over sixty kids to run. In life, challenges are easier when we have the courage to run up and face them. Rather than turn inward, I looked to empower other kids becoming a light in a time of darkness.

I taught inclusion for the slowest runner, equity to remove gender stereotypes, and respect among my multiracial participants. I emerged as a community leader gaining employment as a private running coach for a blind student and nanny to an autistic child. Adults sought my services for 1:1 and group training. I learned that I am, by nature, a teacher and a coach. I am able to hear the hurt and unwind the fear inherent in the unknown.

A recurrence scare in the beginning of junior year terrified me and negatively impacted my grades, especially AP Chemistry. I bombed one test and could not recover. I thought I could carry fear in one hand and let confidence in the other outweigh it, but that doesn't work. To kids reading this, advocate for yourself. No one will understand what you are facing at home. Ask for more time. Do not fear judgment. Beating cancer is one thing. Moving forward is really hard. They say with courage, there is no fear. Every day, I consciously choose to find happiness and not dwell on fear of recurrence, but it's easier

said than done. Triggers are everywhere. From commercials with talking white colon cancer detection boxes to sit com plot lines. Who would possibly think that "Thor: Love and Thunder" would have cancer as a major plot line? Thanks, Marvel.

What I've learned is that every trigger that feels like burning fire will cool like embers in time. Trust me.

People say that the horrible things that happen change us for the better. Those people haven't experienced horrible things. Being the son of a pandemic survivor-warrior is part of my identity. We love deeper. Show up stronger. We know bravery and sacrifice. We know how important every hug is. Children of cancer are built from the capes of heroes.

Defying the odds, Mom is twenty-seven months cancer-free. Though I wasn't meant to hear it, I once heard her say how much she desperately wants to grow old and beat the odds of her prognosis. I painted a small watercolor portrait of what I think she might look like when she's old. The simple brush strokes, without defining ink lines, may draw criticism that the piece is unfinished, but I believe with all of my heart that her story is unfinished and I made this artistic choice purposefully. I'll always see the best version of myself through her eyes.

Today, I'm leading a team of students to build a painted rock garden at Dana Farber Cancer Institute in her honor. You won't see the word hope on any of them.

## November by Rory

*12th grade, Virginia  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

Twelve years old. Barely edging thirteen, I spend the week of my birthday in an ICU waiting room. I have a strawberry ice cream carton in my hand, and it has freezer burn. The plastic spoon breaks with a snap when I dig into it. "Don't you want to say anything to him?" waits in the air, sitting heavy. "No, thank you." I dig into the ice cream with a now snapped spoon, feeling tense and heavy. I allow myself to finish the ice cream before following my mom into the ICU. There are glass doors, and the air reeks of hand sanitizer and cleaner. In my dad's room, there is an ugly, muddy yellow bag of urine at the end of his bed, a chart on the wall asking how I feel today with red and blue faces on a scale of 1-10. Finally, there is a version of my dad on the bed. A sickly, sweaty,

pale, hollow version of my dad. Multiple Myeloma has wrecked him- paired with pneumonia, it is ripping and tearing the rest of his body apart. I stand by the cabinets, waiting to see if he'll wake up, or talk to me, and tell me he's sorry for missing my school play. He doesn't do either of them. Looking at him makes me feel sick. There are tubes down his throat and nose, and suddenly I'm the one who can't breathe.

My dad isn't in the ICU yet, he's in an extended care facility. We receive an enormous amount of balloons and baskets from friends and family and strangers, and I wonder if we need to send thank you cards. His room is dry and tiled brown, and I notice there is a green stuffed frog in one of the woven care baskets. Are we supposed to say thank you? The room is spacious, and empty, but a tiny twin bed rests in the middle as the only reminder people wait here. People wait for death to creep up, wait for stale, recycled air to run out. My dad waits here. The pile of cards, balloons, and baskets provides a stark comparison to the muddy walls and floors. Do we have thank you cards at home? In the lobby, as we leave from visiting, there is a musty and moldy rug. It feels soft under my shoes. I run my feet over while I wait as my mom talks to the receptionist. It's dark out, and I have school in the morning. I still need to say thank you for the casseroles we've been given.

My Spanish teacher pulls me aside after class the following day to kiss my cheeks and ask if we liked her enchiladas. We haven't gotten to it yet- there are piles of food and veggie trays sitting in our kitchen. "It was so good, thank you." She pulls me into a hug before I can get any more words out. Her hand is soft and is resting on the top of my head while she prays. She prays over me, in a whisper and I feel warm for the first time in a while. I want to cry, but I say thank you.

It's November first. I feel better today, hopeful, happy even. Mom is at the hospital still- she's been up all night. I can't remember who takes me home. When I walk in, the piano bench that sat in the dining room has been moved into the kitchen. I hear my mom walk in, and there are a few of dad's friends with her. She looks tired. My mom calls us- me and my sister into the kitchen to talk. I don't feel happy anymore, I am dreading what's about to come. Dad's friends are waiting behind her as my sister and I sit hunched, waiting. I register the words "Your dad's gone." slightly before weak, leaky tears start to come. My sister is sobbing at this point, and I feel out of place. I step onto the porch to get some air, and I call my English teacher. The second she picks up, I start sobbing so hard, my lungs feel small. I am gasping and gasping for a break, a break to breathe. It doesn't come.

November fifth. It's my birthday today. The funeral was yesterday, but we all seem to brush that aside. My family and I eat seafood near the beach. I smile and laugh when I'm supposed to, and the second I get home and into my bed, I collapse. I sob and sob into the pillowcase, clenching around the cotton with a sort of strength and vigor I didn't know I had. There are tears and snot running down my face and onto my bed, and it



starts to hurt to breathe. My hair is matted and my face is hot and red, and every bone in my body shakes.

I want to say it got easier. And in some ways, it did. Eventually, the casseroles and food stopped coming, and sympathy cards and prayers ceased. My mother played both mom and dad, something I will forever applaud her for. There is still a hole inside of me, a part of me that will always struggle to breathe whenever people talk about their dads- and the realization that I don't have a dad anymore. I pushed through the shock of the loss and carried on. At eighteen, I have been and accomplished many things, and I will continue to do so, with my dad beside me. Grief never really leaves, but we learn to grow with it.

## Vocabulary by Aubrienne

*12th grade, Arizona*

*Personal Diagnosis*

At thirteen years old, I thought I was proficient in vocabulary— after all, I understood all the words from our new vocabulary list each week. There was a certain comfort in seeing a new word, understanding it, and looking forward to using it in some out-of-context fashion at the dinner table.

Approaching winter, I got a cold and my neck was constantly sore. One week of school missed turned into two, which turned into three. Instead of going to school for my weekly vocabulary tests, I frequented the pediatrician's office. No one understood why I wasn't getting better, so we kept trying every possible antibiotic treatment even though they would all ultimately fail. After being dubbed the "medical mystery" of the doctor's office, I was sent to get my bloodwork done. In that short yet terrifying visit, I was able to learn some new words that I doubted my friends at school would be learning about: "red and white blood cells", "platelets", "bacterial or fungal infections", and more.

Results came back and my parents told me the doctors wanted to get one more test: a "biopsy" of one of the bumps on my neck. I was already sufficiently terrified of needles going into my arm, so I could hardly stomach the idea of one going into my neck. I emerged from the operation room with wet eyes and nail marks on my dad's hand from squeezing it so hard. I thought that would be the worst of my sickness, that I could start seeing my friends again and begin feeling better. I was sadly too naive to even fathom that this was only the beginning.

That Monday, I woke up for a drive to the hospital instead of to school. However, I was still exposed to new vocabulary, even if I could have gone my whole life without ever needing to apply these words to myself.

"Oncologist": the person who told me that I, at thirteen, had stage 4 cancer.

“Hodgkin’s Lymphoma”: the poison that was littered throughout my body.

“Lymph node”: the bumps on my neck that were meant to fight disease, but for some reason, were the cause of mine.

“Chemotherapy”: a second poison that was, somehow, supposed to heal me while simultaneously draining the life from me.

“Relapse”: the chance that even if you survive cancer, it can come back at any time.

Six months. Half of a year. In comparison to one’s entire life, this seems like a meager amount of time. For the next six months, I would undergo aggressive treatment. I would live in constant fear of death, guilt from the sadness of my family, and intense suffering from the chemotherapy’s side effects.

The beginning of my treatment was difficult to adjust to as I could barely comprehend how much my life would begin to change. The first night I learned I was sick, I had to sit and will myself to even utter the words, “I have cancer”. The only things I associated with cancer prior to my diagnosis were frightening hair loss and nausea. Unfortunately, I would experience both of these and more.

In my first cycle, I coded due to a severe anaphylactic reaction to one of my chemotherapies. My mom and sister had to watch in horror as I screamed and thrashed about in my bed. I watched them, helpless, as I woke up with half of the oncology team in my room and an oxygen mask secured to my face. It seemed as though my treatment was starting off strong, but not in the way we were hoping. I was on a regiment of five aggressive chemotherapy agents. To me, it was easier to think about it as five new vocabulary words:

“Brentuximab-Vedotin”: the experimental drug I qualified for that was supposed to decrease my chances of relapse.

“Doxorubicin”: an agent affectionately referred to as the “red-devil chemo” for good reason.

“Cyclophosphamide”: the chemotherapy that generally signaled my nurse to come in and give me medicine for the side effects.

“Etoposide-phosphate”: the replacement for etoposide after my reaction.

“Vincristine”: the poison that marked the end of that particular cycle.

The effects of my chemotherapy were so great that more medications were needed to treat the side effects, which in turn required more medications, which in turn produced more side effects—a truly vicious cycle of poison. It got to the point where I would have rather been put to sleep with Benadryl than be conscious through my cycles.

I slowly watched myself become unrecognizable in the mirror: my body wasted away into a skeleton, my hair fell out in clumps, and my clothes consisted of hospital gowns. I lived in constant dread of my next cycle and would wonder if I had the strength to make it through. I either woke to the cries of my ten-month-old hospital neighbor suffering from Glioblastoma or my nurse needing my vitals every four hours. I couldn’t stop asking myself, Why me? Why us? Why now? I was exhausted. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t

sleep. I couldn't see any hope of a normal life for myself after treatment. It didn't matter how much I wanted to get better. I was trapped inside a body that was betraying me. As they always say, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. In my case, my light was a miracle. After my second round of chemotherapy, my scans were almost completely clear, which meant I didn't need to get radiation. I knew I still had to finish my remaining five cycles, but for the first time, I felt like it was possible for me to awake from living through this nightmare.

I started seeing more of these pockets of joy as my treatment persisted. As my hair fell out, I learned to knit different colored hats with my mom and laughed as I skipped over a stitch. As my nurse woke me up every four hours, I talked with them about anything and everything— perhaps what they were like when they were my age, what they would draw on my window the next day, or what their favorite doughnut was. As I distracted myself from the side effects, I sang Disney songs with my sister, ate midnight snacks with my brother, cuddled with my dog, and joked with my dad. Battling cancer taught me more about something that was not necessarily a vocabulary word, but a growing feeling: “hope”. Hope was each of these small moments with my oncology team, nurses, friends, and family. Hope was the sureness that I, like countless others before me, possessed the strength to survive this journey. On June 11th, 2018, I added my favorite vocabulary word to my list: “cancer-free”.

Cancer was certainly the most difficult fight of my life, but I learned countless lessons in resilience and gratitude. I could not have completed my treatment without the strength of my entire support system and my fellow survivors, and I continue to give back to the community as thanks to them. When I look back on those six months of treatment, it's the warm feeling of joy and love with interacting with my oncology team or family that I remember most, not necessarily the suffering. Having cancer taught me that even in the darkest times, we can find happiness anywhere, even in the smallest of things.

## When All That's Left is Love by Nadia

*12th grade, Washington*

*Loved One's Diagnosis*

The thing about brain cancer is that it makes you stop believing that the universe, or God, or whatever thing is watching over you has any vested interest in your life. It comes swiftly and suddenly, and when the whole thing is over you are eight years old and trying to conceive a world without your dad in it. Your head spins.

My dad is sometimes more of an image than he is a real, tangible person to me. In my mind he is irrevocably connected to these abstract concepts: childhood. The outdoors.

Judaism, spirituality. The Beatles. My memory of him is fragmented: the time before he was sick is blurry, it mixes with itself and there is no narrative, no timeline to follow, just images that I sometimes fear are half-imagined.

The images come in slow, languid waves.

I remember feeling the ground shift under my feet, my dad's hands over mine on the wheel of the sailboat. I repeat the words port and starboard, he is a sailor and I am the apprentice. The air is salty and I am happy.

I see my grandma blessing the wine at a Shabbat dinner. In a few years she will be in a home for elders with memory loss, and repeatedly she will ask my mom, "where's Alan, where's Alan?" and my mom will say nothing because Alan has been dead for a year.

I see my father too.

My father in a hospital bed, my father whose face is swollen, whose mouth droops on one side.

I see my father before illness, teaching me how to ski. I see him sneaking me M&Ms on the lift. I see him playing the Beatles on the car ride home.

I see my father, post-surgery, with staples in his head. I see him on the fourth of July, three days before he dies, words slurring -- at this point he can hardly speak, his cognition has degraded to the point of near-senility --telling me that he'll miss me when he goes to heaven.

I see my father on pancake Fridays and french toast Sundays, giving me a sip of his coffee, laughing when I spit it out in exaggerated disgust.

I love these memories, of course, but I try to keep myself from replaying them too often. I read somewhere once that everytime we recall a memory we overwrite it, and the picture gets a little blurrier, a little more distorted. Sometimes I feel as if there is nothing left of these people I loved except my memories. And that's the thing I struggle with the most: feeling like the person who knew my dad wasn't really me, like none of it really happened and I am grieving an invisible loss.

So what I do is I hold onto the material things that remind me that my father really existed in this world, that he was concrete and solid and alive. I keep his old t-shirts, I keep the Snoopy stuffie he bought the day I was born on my bed, even though I'm probably too old for it, I root fervently for the Boston Red Socks. My favorite Beatles song is I am the Walrus because I distinctly remember that I cried every time he played it in the car. I binge Seinfeld and Curb Your Enthusiasm, his favorite shows, because I know he planned to watch them with me once I was old enough. I go to synagogue. I listen to my mom's stories.

I will not write of silver linings, nor of meaning inherent to this experience. There are none. Death is random and sudden and terrible. If everything 'happened for a reason' (I can't describe the frustration I felt the first time I heard this phrase after his death) then I would be watching Seinfeld with my dad right now. We would go skiing every winter. I

would not be nearly as familiar with the cold, clinical stench of a hospital room as I am today.

No, I will not write of silver linings.

But I can write about this: experiencing such a great loss at such a young age has taught me to make my own meaning in a universe of casualty and indifference. And this meaning comes from recognizing that even though little is tangibly left of my father, he still exists with me in this world.

He exists not only in the physical objects he left behind, but also in the love I give to others. Knowing him taught me how rare and beautiful it is to be surrounded by people whom I care about, people who care about me. I never miss an opportunity to laugh with my friends. I hug my cat about a million times a day. I make sure to tell my mom I love her every time I leave the house, because I am acutely aware of the fact that it may be the last time I see her. Knowing my dad taught me to love freely and openly.

My favorite quote of all time comes from a poem that was read at my dad's funeral service.. It goes like this:

"Love doesn't die  
People do.  
So, when all that's left of me  
Is love,  
Give me away."

(Epitaph, Merit Malloy)

## The Collision by Cedar

*12th grade, Alaska  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

Cancer wasn't an event or a treatment plan for me and my family. It was a multi-car pileup on the highway, all tangled metal and broken glass. One car veering into another lane, resulting in an explosion that included my grandfather's terminal Pancreatic cancer diagnosis, my 8-year-old sister's almost simultaneous diagnosis with kidney cancer, and me, a ten-year-old playing Jane Banks in the local production of the musical Mary Poppins, putting my imaginary family back together while my real-life family was torn apart.

On one side was my grandfather dying, sick with a disease that had no cure and little chance for treatment. On the other side was my sister, diagnosed with Wilms Tumor, a pediatric kidney cancer. I could feel the sigh of relief when the oncologist assured my parents that her cancer was very treatable. Before the Christmas of 2014, cancer seemed like something distant. A monster with fanged jaws that lurked in the darkness, just far enough away for me to avoid. Suddenly, it was something that my ten-year-old mind had to understand in conflicting ways. Some people get well, some don't. My family had one of each. The social workers and my parents stressed the difference between treatable and not-treatable cancer, trying to separate my sister's cancer from my grandfather's. It's a hard distinction for a 10 year old to handle.

My grandfather had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer just a few weeks before the holiday, and the doctors made it clear it was terminal. We all knew that this would be his last Christmas, so despite the pain he was in, he put on a smile for his grandkids. I tried to entertain him by practicing the songs and choreography I had been learning for Mary Poppins, even though he couldn't do much but watch me and my cousins from his recliner. Gone were the candid photos he loved to take of family outings to restaurants. My mom explained neuropathy to us, how he couldn't hold his favorite paint brushes anymore. I remember seeing his last painting still on his easel in the garage, finished except for the details. The last Christmas card that he signed for me was in shaky, almost unrecognizable handwriting. Nonetheless, it was thinkable. A grandparent sick, a family pulling together for a final holiday. A possibility everyone is aware of. The diagnosis was a straight road, albeit full of grief, but everyone drove it together.

The collision came the day after Christmas.

That night, in the guest bedroom, my sister doubled over, clutching her stomach. The post-christmas family celebrations came to a screeching halt, and my parents rushed her to the car. From the Emergency Room, they ended up in the children's hospital, where the pediatric surgeon explained that a loaf-of-bread sized, malignant tumor on my sister's right kidney had ruptured. She had cancer too.

The next few days were a blur. My memory comes in shards. I remember the noise of the children's hospital lobby, pastel linoleum floors and a huge wall of windows that showed the sky outside. I can feel a pit in my stomach forming when I think of the cafeteria hallway that we wheeled my little sister through after she was cleared to fly home. "Best behavior," I told myself. "Don't be a problem. My family has enough."

When a person is diagnosed with cancer, the people around them fall into near-predetermined roles. My family had already grappled with a terminal diagnosis, and we had accepted our roles for my grandfather. Now we had another, more favorable diagnosis with better odds and completely different roles. Somehow, that difference made both roles harder to fill. Cancer is never easy to handle, but we can manage to comprehend one diagnosis, one treatment plan, one prognosis. When cancer hits two

people you love at once, It can tear you apart. I was in rehearsals for Mary Poppins, but I was an actor in my real life. In scene one, I was an energetic granddaughter, entertaining my grandfather and the rest of the family as we avoided what was imminent. In scene two, I was controlled and quiet, making as few problems as possible for my mom and dad as they tackled a parental nightmare. As I attempted to fit into both roles at once, I was being pulled in two directions. I couldn't truly help my grandfather, his doctors and treatment plan made that abundantly clear, and I couldn't truly protect my sister from the reality of living with cancer.

When a grandparent, an aunt, or a parent are diagnosed, many kids are somewhat shielded from the reality of the situation. Not the risks or the severity, but from the day-to-day hardship. My grandfather went to every effort to conceal his pain from us, to look as healthy as possible for the rest of the family. He tried to protect his grandkids from the full extent of the disease, much like other adults with cancer. When my sister was diagnosed, it was the opposite. We wanted to protect her from harm, to protect her from the pain and fear, but there wasn't a way to do that. We weren't in her body. We didn't have the medicine to make it all go away. Even in external situations, I felt useless. One afternoon while visiting my sister in the city six hours away, where she was receiving treatment, she felt well enough to go indoor ice skating. Children in the mall where the rink was pointed and stared. A child her age skated up to us and asked her why she "looked so weird". At that moment, we were both paralyzed with the audacity of the question. I don't remember what her response was. I was too busy considering running the kid over with my skates.

At its core, a cancer diagnosis is an economy of protection. Protecting cells from disease, the patient from harm. Protecting your spouse and your children from how hard it really is. Protecting your child or your sister from their own body. The difference that I struggled to grasp between terminal and treatable seems simple. Cancer that can be treated comes with protection against it, a talisman in the form of chemotherapy and radiation. Terminal cancer slips past all shields. In the spring of the same year, my sister was able to come home to watch my performance in Mary Poppins. My grandfather didn't make it to the performance, and died in hospice after a final operation.

Years later, my sister is an avid painter. She wants to go to art school, and she uses my grandfather's oil paints and brushes to create her pieces. I'm grateful for her health, I'm grateful that she's still here with us, even when she hides my flat iron in the morning to aggravate me. A piece of me, though, is trapped in the roles I took on at the moment the diagnoses collided. Part of me still wants to protect and to be protected at the same time. Inside of me, under the wrapper, cancer will always drive part of my motivation. I've wanted to become a pediatric surgeon since my sister's diagnosis. I know that underneath the wrapper, for the rest of my life, my family's cancer experience will have one hand on the wheel.

# This Is Me Trying by Emma

*12th grade, Pennsylvania*

*Personal Diagnosis*

If hell is real, and I am destined to be tortured for all of eternity, it would be through smells. The smell of the doctors office when I was diagnosed with leukemia. The smell of cheap takeout that I ate on holidays because I was too sick to be with my loved ones. The smell of my house that once brought me comfort, that now smelled like the too clean chemicals. An ever present reminder that I was fighting for my life.

I don't have the best memory. I often put things down and later can not remember where. But as weird as it is, I can never forget the smells of things. Something as simple as catching the scent of someone's hand sanitizer throws me back into the memories of laying in a hospital bed for weeks and being so nauseous I could not move.

Death is inevitable. Everyone knows this. But actually processing that statement? Not everyone knows how to do that. Certainly not a thirteen year old girl who had just been hanging out with her friends and playing basketball.

As a kid, I had never experienced the death of a loved one, or even a pet. Everyone in my life had always stayed there. I did not realize I had the naïve belief that feeling safe and happy would last forever until it was shattered in a doctors office. I mean, cancer? That happens to people on tv shows or distant relatives that I have never meant. Not to me. Well, until it did.

With nothing much else to do besides taking pills and being poked by needles, I thought a lot about my life. There was a brief period where I did nothing but stare at my ceiling and ponder about how meaningless my life was. I now realize that I was depressed. But if you asked me then, I would have sworn on my life that I was perfectly fine. That's the scariest thing looking back. I'm still scared today that it might happen again. But I took that fear and now understand that I need to talk to people. To be honest about what I am feeling even when its hard.

Being a young teen who's life was now spent in a hospital, I quickly grew out of any similarities with friends. I no longer could spend lunch discussing our latest crush or have sleepovers where we would giggle and talk all night. It did not take long before I lost touch with almost all of my friends and I could no longer see anyone outside my immediate family. I pretended I was fine with it, this would all be over soon anyway. What's a few years of my life spent lonely in the hospital bed compared to a life time of happy memories I'll get to have after I beat it? That was a lot easier to think than it was



to believe. At any moment I could have a complication from my chemo treatments that ended my life. Nothing about my life felt good or okay.

Even now, I know that I am one of the lucky ones. I get the chance to keep living my life. And yet, I still feel like something was stolen from me. How could I return to class like a normal student when I no longer recognized the peers I had started my education with? Going to class now felt like I was thrown on a stage with no script in front of a full crowd of people staring at me, watching my every move. I went from a girl who had groups of friends, played sports, and excelled in school to someone who with every breathe she took, felt like she was falling more and more behind. Facing that fear and loneliness was hard. But not allowing myself to try and live my life was exhausting.

Eventually I picked up on important patterns: fundraisers thrown in support of me, food constantly sent over to my family for dinner, and little notes my sister would write for me with silly puns. My naiveness was no longer able to bring me comfort. Instead, I found it in people. You can never trust your life will not go horribly wrong at any moment. But you can trust the good in people. The kind that helps a girl they have never met face an impossible battle. It was the love and support of strangers and my loved ones that got me through my treatment.

Even though smells torment me, they also save me. The smell of my mother's coconut and lavender shampoo as she pulls me in for a hug after a rough round of chemo. The smell of the home cooked lasagna my aunt just dropped off. The smell of my favorite candy with a handwritten note taped on top that my sister gave me. Because at the end of the day, they are not just smells, they are my memories. And my memories, the good and the bad, make me who I am.

## Always With Me by Caitlin

*10th grade, California  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

I. Eyes

"She has floaters? What's that?"

My mother shook her head. "I don't know, but we'll have to go to the hospital and get a checkup today. She can't even see out of her left eye! 哎呀, it's because she keeps on

wearing that nail polish, I told her, Belinda, that has lead in it!..." Her mutters were cut off as the rusty kettle on the fire screamed a barely noticeable whine that rushed to a high pitched crescendo.

Glancing uneasily at the time on the oven, I wondered where my mother and sister were. Should I call... Nah, mom's probably at Best Buy fangirling over the new vacuums... I pitied my sister.

The door creaked open. I stopped my meal, staring in confusion as my mother's slumped body stepped over slowly, her eyes hidden by her usually iron straight hair, strands of which now escaped her deflated ponytail. I did not understand this vague shroud of dread that had settled into my stomach.

"Your sister is sick. She... she has a disease," she informed me shakily, her fingernails digging into her black purse, her eyes staring at the wall.

I blinked in confusion.

"...So. Um. Why are you crying?" I hovered awkwardly between my bowl of soup and my mother. I could not understand what was going on. If my sister was sick, couldn't the doctors just give her some medicine and she'd be on her way? I mean, it sucked that she was sick, but she had been sick before. She would get better. When I came down with the flu, my mother never cried like she was right now. I could not understand what was going on.

## II. Hair

I stared at my sister. I could not understand why my sister had to shave all of her hair. What sort of disease requires baldness to get better? Obviously, this "leukemia" was much more serious than a flu, but I had faith in my sister, who with the help of medicine would defeat this annoying thing.

"How bad is it?" she chuckled awkwardly, taking off her beanie and stepping in quickly, closing the door so the neighbors would not see. I blinked. I did not know what to say. I remembered reading somewhere about how the hair was the flame of the body, how it brought warmth and brightness to oneself. The wild, free-moving strands of my sister's hair had been shaved off. It seemed that my sister's flame was extinguished at the moment.

"It's not bad! Like, if you put a beanie over it, you actually look kinda cool! Plus, you have that wig, right?"

"I guess... The wig is kinda itchy, though..." she mused, absentmindedly running her hand over hair that was not there.

"You should wear a beanie though, 'cause no offense but your head looks like a dumpling—"

"A what?"

“Yeah, it looks like your head was made of dough, and someone reached down and pinched the top up like a little soup dumpling!”

“You little—!”

I giggled as she chased me around, her eyes alight with annoyance. Her fire had been relit.

### III. Hands

The hospital room was empty, yet overflowing with machines, tubes, IV stands, the incessant whining of the machines and the ragged breaths of my sister. Sitting beside her, I grabbed the shea butter container and took a dollop out. I rubbed it onto her hands, noticing with a pang in my heart its appearance.

Her hands had always been something I liked to look at. I would sit across from her as she tapped on her keyboard, admiring the soft pink nails, the elegant curve to her slender fingers, the long pearl white nails that made a clicking sound on the table. I stared down at my stubby, blotchy hands, wondering if using more shea butter and eating less would help my hands look as pretty as hers.

Yet now her nails were cut clumsily to the quick, the back of her palms cracked and spider-webbed, her fingers that were constantly darting from one thing to another now laid limp on her red blanket.

As I pulled my hands away from hers, she gestured weakly at me, motioning for me to look towards her phone, where she had typed out something on the notes app.

don't be sad ok ik babas been rly mad lately but hes just worried for me dont wry abt him and cheer up ok ill ask mom to get u some ice cream and u can play games on my phone

Reading those words, I felt so ashamed of myself. “Thanks 姐姐, I really appreciate that. You should focus on yourself though! If you need anything, let me know.” Here I was, acting like I had the right to be in a bad mood when my sister, who was sick and lying on the bed, unable to talk with her friends, complete school, or eat ice cream, was comforting me. I smiled tightly, pushing down my sudden upwelling of emotion, trying not to cry at the strength of my sister.

### IV. Ashes

The birds chirped farewell as the clunk of hard shovels against mud sounded. I sat at the front in a foldable chair watching as strangers lowered my sister's urn into the muddy ground. My mind was a balloon, flying away into the clouds. At the very least, I felt grateful that the weather was so pleasant. If my sister were to go to Heaven on this day, I would rather that her last image of Earth be that of a bright blue sky and swaying green grass.

### V. Always In My Heart

How can I even begin to describe who Belinda is? How can I box her personality, her life, her emotions and character into the curves and lines of words on a screen? But I must start somewhere.

Belinda is the weirdest person I know. She liked to say “gorlypop” and make weird faces to send to her friends as Snapchats. She liked to pull the drawstrings of her hoodie so tight that only her nostrils were visible, and tie the strings into a bow.

Belinda is the smartest person I know. She took internships, AP classes, was an editor of the school newspaper, helped with school events, and knew exactly what her direction was. When her direction was uprooted by her disease, she simply switched to online school. She studied, completed homework, Skyped with friends, made decorations for school events, and applied to colleges to become a nurse. No matter what, Belinda moved forward.

Belinda is the most admirable person I know. She wanted to help people, first as an ambassador, then a nurse. She doted over the hospital’s child patients, joking that she was like their second mother. Even when in pain, she told Mom that she was feeling OK, and sure if you want me to eat the gross oatmeal because it’s good for me, fiiiine... She joked around with Dad and asked him how the stocks he bought were doing. She stuck googly eyes onto the ID cards of her doctors and gave her favorite nurses her Kermit paintings.

Belinda is my friend. She taught me the alphabet, how to tie my shoelaces, what the quadratic formula was, and how to apply makeup so cute guys would notice me. She gave me her phone to play games and listen to music, and when we could, we went to visit the Golden Gate Bridge and buy Cheetos from Safeway. She would always remind Dad to bring me fried chicken from the hospital cafeteria because she knew I loved greasy foods, and whenever I was feeling down she would persuade Mom to buy me ice cream.

On Belinda’s gravestone, it reads: “Forever in our hearts.” As my anger and grief slowly gave way to acceptance and reflection, I finally understood its meaning. Because Belinda is not dead, not yet, not until I forget her. And I remember Belinda. I remember Belinda when I wear her favorite jacket, when I tie my shoelaces into a bow the way she taught me, when I visit her every holiday, when I make origami flowers to put on her grave, when I write this story, when I joke about her dumpling shaped scalp, when I look at the sunset and wonder if she is looking at it too.

Even if her body is not here, her spirit is still here in my heart. She is a part of me, my heart, and every day as my heart grows and heals, she does too. To you who is reading this, please remember my sister, for this way Belinda still lives on within our heart.

# Joy Amidst Sorrows by Jeanette

*12th grade, South Carolina*

*Personal Diagnosis*

Eyes locked on the ball soaring through the air, I run up to it and jump, the power in my legs launching me skyward. I twist my body as my hand comes into contact with the ball as I spike it down as hard as I can. It lands with a bang, perfectly in the corner and out of reach of every imaginary player on the field. I prepare myself to go again, feeling my heart racing and the sweat dripping down my face. A smile dances on my lips as I practice for the first game of the season, reveling in the strength and speed of every movement, each hit landing with deadly accuracy on the other side. Around the fifth repetition, the ball hit the net, barely making it over. I was breathing hard, harder than I normally did so early in practice. I frown slightly as I try to go again but this time it doesn't even make it over the net. I lean over as I desperately try to catch my breath and gaze after the ball slowly rolling away. I went home crying that night, unsure of why I was unable to do what I had done the previous week with ease. When I had finally calmed down, I lay in bed and sighed. I probably just needed more cardio. That was all. A week later I found myself sitting in a small room waiting for my blood tests to come back, the result of a hastily booked doctor's appointment following the discovery of the many enlarged lymph nodes in my neck. My mom had been a doctor back in South Africa, and at first, she thought I may have sarcoidosis, an illness my grandmother had struggled with. After one look at my blood tests, she seemed surprised and immediately looked at the pediatrician with concern in her eyes. They shared a long, knowing look. He sent me to the ER, not wanting to confirm anything without a hematologist. They didn't want to tell me what was going on, but the surprised look on my mom's face paired with her concern gave it away. It wasn't sarcoidosis. The only thing left in my mind was cancer.

The next day I was diagnosed with ALL, Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. At first, it didn't feel real. Thoughts about my diagnosis were coated in a sort of numbness that prevented me from gleaning any meaning from the phrase "you have cancer". However, after numerous additional tests and a few more days spent in the hospital, the reality of my situation slowly dawned on me. I had cancer.

The next few weeks were some of the hardest in my life, where I watched as my dreams and hopes for the future seemed to shatter before my eyes. I slowly lost my athletic abilities and had to come to terms with the fact that I would no longer graduate a year early. All those years of discipline, hard work, and dedication amounted to nothing;

all that I had ever achieved or worked for was stripped away until there was nothing left but the mere memory of what once was and will never be again.

As the days turned to weeks and the weeks to months I struggled like never before to do things that once required no thought at all. I fought through my nausea and the brain fog caused by my medications to complete the two courses I had reduced my school schedule to. The things I normally did for leisure became far too difficult for my dying body to manage and it seemed like I would have to spend the next two and a half years of my life in a hopeless state of merely existing.

After another difficult day of fighting for survival, I realized that wallowing in despair and self-pity wasn't going to change my situation. If anything, it would actually just negatively influence my happiness and make this unavoidable experience all the more challenging. Even though I couldn't see it or understand it, God had a plan for my life and a reason for everything that was happening to me. If all I ever did was focus on all I was losing, then I would risk losing all that I could gain. It would be difficult, but if I trusted in God's plans and ability to use anything for good and focused my attention on what I could learn, then I could not only make it through this trial but, looking back, I might one day even come to the point where I was grateful for it. I didn't have to let my circumstances control me, I could, and would, rise above them and do the best with what I had.

I was no longer able to fill my days with studying and playing volleyball or tennis and strangely enough, I discovered that I had more of the thing I thought had been stolen from me: time. I began to explore my other interests and found that I loved art; painting, jewelry making, drawing, wood burning, wire working, calligraphy, you name it. With every stroke of my brush, every curve of a wire, I little by little was able to forget my pain and nausea and despair for a world of peace and bliss, letting my hands do what they wanted and giving my brain a much-needed break from all the strain that life had recently put on it. I was now able to create things of beauty that gave me joy and allowed me to share that with others.

With help from my friends and family, I was able to endure the many hardships that came my way in the years to come. They supported me through every hospital visit, every injection, every allergic reaction, and every procedure. Through every trial, they were there for me, and I was able to see the depths of their love and care. I learned that God was there for me too. He has given me a way to enjoy life even through the worst of circumstances and has led me every step of the way. He has given me an amazing medical team that has inspired me to also help others in need. My entire perspective on life has changed and my goals for the future have changed with it. I realized through this trial that if all I ever focused on was myself, I would always be looking, always chasing after the next thing I thought I needed to be happy. I found that by instead focusing on serving others I was happier than I could ever be chasing after my own wants and desires.

While I still don't fully understand why I had to get cancer and wouldn't want to go through what I have again, I have come to the point where I am grateful for the things I have learned through my experiences. I am grateful for the assurance of faith I have been given and the knowledge that because I have overcome this obstacle in life I can persevere and overcome any others that come my way. I have been changed as a person, and though I will never be able to regain all that I have lost, I would also never have been able to gain all that I have without that loss. Now, as I look to the future, I don't do so in fear of what is to come, but I do so with confidence, knowing that I will persevere and overcome all the trials ahead with joy amidst sorrows.

## Don't walk away from a good fight by Sebastian

*12th grade, Arkansas  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

Waking up one morning and seeing my dad in a pink bunny onesie is my favorite memory of him. I can still vividly remember him sashaying around in that onesie, getting ready for what should have been the worst day of his life. My dad knew it would be a difficult day for him and other cancer patients. So he set out to make the most of it by making others smile. Wearing his onesie, he encouraged other patients while saying his last words using his voice, "Don't walk away from a good fight." Honestly, who wouldn't smile at the sight of a 6'3", 275-pound man wearing a pink bunny onesie?

My dad had stage four adenoid cystic carcinoma, and surgery offered the hope of more time to live. The morning of the pink bunny suit, he was scheduled to have a laryngectomy with radical neck revision at UAMS Cancer Center. It would be unimaginably painful and fundamentally change him forever. My dad's sole ability to breathe would be through a hole in his neck. He would not be able to smell or physically laugh again. Later, he would relearn to speak with a synthetic voice box. He would eat through a feeding tube for months but would be alive.

Unfortunately, the surgery didn't eradicate all the cancer. Instead, he continued to fight with radiation, chemotherapy, and clinical trials. These trials were expensive and exhausting, but he never wanted to stop fighting.

My dad died four days before his fortieth birthday. My little brother and I got off the bus, and my mom was waiting for us at the front door. I wanted to cry and fall to my knees when I heard the news; instead, I held my little brother tight. I gave him a hug that almost crushed him. It was as if someone had kicked me in the gut, but I wanted to be strong for him.

After losing my dad, I watched my mom struggle to pay the bills. Our family now had to add financial worries to our grief and emotional rollercoaster. My dad did not have life insurance. It had lapsed a few years back when he lost his job before cancer, and he didn't make it a priority again when he got a new job, thinking he had plenty of time. We donated his body to research and chose cremation to be able to take him with us since we were unsure about our future. There was a celebration of life planned for my dad out of state, and I remember asking if we would be safe traveling without my dad. I had nightmares and was terrified that my mom would decide to put us up for adoption because she thought we would be better off. So I begged her and made her promise to keep us together.

Life had changed. I had no motivation, and things felt dark. I no longer enjoyed school; where I used to thrive now felt pointless. Every smile or greeting of how are you doing reopened my wounds, magnifying my loss. I dreaded the lunch room because I had to stand in the designated free lunch line. My basketball team made special additions to our jerseys to remember my dad. Although well intended, it made me feel different, lonely and exposed. I muddled through weeks of uncontrollable tears and numbness and finally moved into autopilot.

As the months passed, my feelings amplified as I slowly realized he wasn't returning. Grief is a dirty dog that doesn't fight fair. I was desperate to exhale. I finally found solace and could breathe when I transferred schools in junior high, where nobody knew my story, but it wasn't a fix. I was still uncomfortable with how everyone in my neighborhood was always helping my family. I felt like a taker and not a giver. Then I remembered that some of my dad's last words were that he was proud of me. I asked myself if he would say those exact words if he saw me now. He fought hard to live, so I decided I wouldn't give up either. If I wanted my dad to say those words when I met him in the afterlife, I'd have to start getting my life back together. From then on, I showed up for life.

I became laser-focused on academic performance, serving my community, and playing sports. Since then, I've studied for every test and completed every homework assignment. The day after I had surgery on my hand, I went to school because I was motivated to make my dad proud. With my mom's help, I mobilized the Banks Tough Tennis fundraiser for cancer patients. After months of planning, the tournament raised



money for six iPads, specialized software, and keyboards. I delivered the iPads to UAMS patients who had lost their ability to speak like my dad. I played varsity for three sports which allowed me a place to feel like just a regular kid. Although my dad's death had shaken my world, I became stronger and more resilient because of it. I used this strength to do my best in school, excel in sports, and help create a better life for my family and community.

When I watched my dad struggle with cancer, I believed he had no good days. My belief, though, was false. He told me just before he died, "You don't have bad days. You have bad moments." My dad's death was a terrible moment, but ultimately, it changed me for the better. I've become more compassionate and stronger because of it. I see life through different eyes. I can honestly say I'm good when people ask me how I am. My dad did not get his desired outcome, but he left me a legacy to live, work tenaciously, and help others to fight their good fight too.

## The Glass Swan by Lauren

*12th grade, Texas  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

I Breathe in, and out. I Breathe in, and out. I can still remember the pew I was sitting in. It was the one towards the back on the right side of the chapel. It wasn't the one I wanted to sit on. I didn't want to be in a pew at all. I wanted to be in the saddle. I didn't want just any saddle, but her saddle. The saddle I would never ride in again. It wasn't that the saddle mattered as much as the person who owned it being there next to me, guiding the horse.

I look around at the people walking throughout the room, taking their seats. I am surrounded by family, but I feel utterly alone. I'm Terrified. It is not that I am scared of the room or the company, but rather the future. How can I move on without her?

I am vaguely aware of the service starting, not my parents, but my distant cousins sitting beside me, and someone getting up to speak. Maybe they sang, told stories, prayed. I'm not sure. I mostly spaced out for that part; numb to reality. Instead, I remembered. I remembered her.

She had a metal shed in her backyard. A shed that was always surrounded by leaves piled high around my 6-year-old shins. She kept the toys in that shed; all of the wonderful crayons, and dresses. I remembered her telling me every time we walked to get them, "Now Lauren be careful because you must always watch for snakes in these leaves." The leaves didn't look scary to me. Maybe the person I was with changed my feelings. Maybe she made me feel safe. It's a random thing to remember. Not something life-changing or fundamental, but just a memory.

Someone else moves to the front of the chapel; by the coffin. They speak about her. Probably tell a funny story that I was too young to understand. But I just remember.

She taught me how to bathe Patron. I still remember the mess we always made, with bubbles and water everywhere, but at least the horse was clean. She always said, "Lauren, make sure you don't walk behind the horse or he may spook and kick you."

My cousin looks at me now; I guess I'm crying. I can't feel the tears. I can't feel anything. I can only remember.

This time, I remember when she got sick. As a 6-year-old, I didn't know what Pancreatic cancer meant. The phrase "stage four" didn't mean anything to me. However, I did understand that she stopped eating, we visited more often, and my parents seemed sad. People told me that she was sick. But she was my Nana, my best friend, grandmas didn't get sick. Right?

I'm aware of a video playing now on the screen at the front of the room. They are playing her favorite song. And then there is a picture of her smiling. As if she was there, but she's not. She won't be there ever again. I can't hug her again. Instead, I can only remember.

I remember the day my dad took me in to say goodbye. I didn't know I was saying goodbye of course, but I think they did. I walked into her room and she was laying in the bed. There was a pack of mint gum on her nightstand. The pack she always had. The kind of gum that smelled like her. There was a jewelry box on the dresser. It was

mirrored and had a glass swan on it. I remember thinking that it was very pretty. I don't remember what I said. Did I tell her I loved her? I don't know. I will never know.

The video ends. It's over.

They gave me the jewelry box with the swan. The swan was so graceful and pretty. It reminded me of her. But it was delicate too, and so it broke. The swan died. I suppose good things are that way. They're Delicate. Easily broken, and never replaceable. Similar to a six-year-old who has to grow up in a day because she finally realized that grandparents can get sick. Just like a six-year-old who has to realize that life is both beautiful, and terrible; that an incredible life can be taken in the blink of an eye. Like a child who learns that glass swans do break.

## Coming Into Focus by Sarah

*12th grade, New York*

*Personal Diagnosis*

Hospital showers are always cold. I wrap my skinny arms around myself as water hits my head. My shoulders feel heavy — I can barely keep them up — and the floor hurts my feet. I'm only halfway done.

Halfway done with the pills I choke down every morning, evening, and night; the IVs full of toxic chemicals making me nauseous; and the reminder that I still won't look normal like all the other nine-year-olds I know. Halfway through wondering if I will ever catch up to or be with them again.

Instead of the normal development of nine- and ten-year-olds, these years with leukemia in the hospital force me to grow in my own, small world. I can't physically go to school or ride a bike, but I can learn from a tutor and go for short walks. I can't play soccer with my team, but I can play with a camera.

On a single blade of grass, I play with lighting. With flowers, I play with framing and composition. As I adjust the lens, I become more confident and finally am able to take pictures of people. I soon add the words shutter speed, aperture, and iso to my vocabulary, and I think about how they all work together to show my unique perspective. I focus on capturing something special in something simple. To make plain what is obvious but often overlooked in the usual fast-pace of life.

When I start high school, I desperately try to catch up on all the time everyone else has already had without me. I'm not pumped with toxins anymore, and I look like the other kids. Except the doubt from that time still lingers. No matter how hard I work or how fast I run, I am still that girl who is separated.

My camera is a step stool; it allows me to reach past those years of missed interaction to connect with other kids my age. Junior year I stand at the dugout of my school's championship softball game, working to show my perspective, getting angles only I can see. The team wins and the girls hug for the last time they're on the field together. I capture that once-in-a-lifetime moment of pure emotion that comes from everything they worked for coming together. The team shares my photos. I share my photos.

I take thousands more photos — of sports teams, landscapes, and friends — and add the best to the yearbook. I create online accounts and gain hundreds of followers. I win awards for my work.

But sometimes that nine-year-old girl holds onto me and won't let go. It's comforting, like a big hug, except when I ask to breathe she won't let me. Sometimes in photography, when a shot isn't working, you need to try a different angle. That's what I tell my younger self.

I'm not like the other kids my age. But I'm also not the skinny, bald, toxin-filled girl anymore. Standing under that water at nine-years-old, I couldn't do anything. If I stopped treatment, I would die. But now, when those feelings of isolation and despair begin to wash over me, I can do something about them. Now, I pick up my camera to engage with the world.

Light drops of water brush over my face. Cool wind runs through my long, brown hair. The faint sound of a whistle blows and my finger hovers over the camera, waiting to capture the perfect moment. I wait as the athletes on the field come closer. I wait, they rush forward, almost perfectly into frame. My finger brushes the top of the camera, changing the dials, adjusting the shutter, allowing me to take a picture just a little faster. Click. One moment catches the rain, the athletes, and my breath.

Now, as I leave the normal setting of high school — like everyone else — I'm stepping into the unknown of college. Now, I can take a step back and consider my future. I'm uncertain exactly what I want, but just as photography was a part of my life during treatment, it will always be a part of my education, career, and my life.

## El cancer nunca me va ganar by Litzzy

*12th grade, Nebraska  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

The normal five minute drive home from school appeared to be an eternity that allowed for all kinds of thoughts to attack, resulting in me shattering. With bottled anger exploding from my broken heart, hands uncontrollably shaking, and frustration leaping out of my black eyes in the form of stinging tears, I exclaim with every ounce of emotion inside me as I grip on to my steering wheel for dear life: "No! Please God DON'T make me do this! I can't do this! This is not fair, please don't make me say goodbye!"

How was I supposed to let go of my beloved grandmother? How was my mother, family, God asking such a thing from me? In the span of 26 months, after being re-diagnosed with breast cancer, I witnessed how that menace of a disease rapidly stripped my grandmother from control as she lost her strength to walk, even eat without assistance. Everyone, my parents, sister, aunts and uncles, kept reminding me that the woman I had looked up to my entire life was days, maybe seconds from leaving me forever.

Although I constantly attempted to avoid my reality by involving myself into more school activities or work, the tragic truth of my sweet grandmother being connected to oxygen tubes laying on a hospice bed in the middle of my living room, always seemed to sneak back into my life.

It was not until my mother sat me down in the safety of my room that the truth hit me like a truck: "Your grandmother has, if she is lucky, two weeks left. You need to say goodbye." I knew what saying goodbye meant. It meant telling my courageous grandmother that I would miss her, that I loved her, and that she would always be in my heart. On paper these words are supposedly simple to say, but when the moment came I was a wreck.

After twenty minutes of losing all of my energy from weeping with pain and fury, I slowly was able to get some composure thanks to whispering a simple prayer: "God, I can only do this with you. Please help me!" With a hoarse voice almost inaudible, I continued to repeat, "please help me." When I finally toppled out of my creamed color Jeep and wobbled up the stairs to the front door of my house, my short little legs began to numb as my trembling hands cautiously opened the door to reality. My heart, which was pounding with great speed, was the only sound combined with the creaking of the floor heard as I tiptoed into the house. My whole body was yelling to run and just avoid the future. However, my faith in God pushed me forward into the dim living room and encouraged me to open my mouth and lovingly say, "Hola abuelita (hi grandma). ¿Puedo sentarme con usted (can I sit next to you)?"

With vivid glistening honey eyes, my grandmother acknowledged my presence and nodded her head indicating that she wanted me to sit with her. As I slid next to her, she laid her small fragile head on my shoulder and slid her tiny skinny fingers into mine. I felt

her love transcending through her actions causing the words I was about to say punch me right in the gut, welling up my black eyes with heavy tears. With a trembling voice I whispered, "Abuelita, le quiero decir algo importante. (Grandma, I need to tell you something important.)"

Concerningly my grandmother quietly responds, "Que paso? (What happened?)" My mouth opened for words to come out, but my emotions bottled out of me in tears and the weak arms of my grandmother immediately wrapped me into a hug - as if she knew what I was going to say. From a deep breath I exclaimed, "¡La extrañaré muchísimo! No quiero que se vaya o que sufra. (I am going to miss you so much. I don't want you to go or suffer.)"

I told her everything. I told her that I would miss her tamales, that I would miss her laugh and humor, that I would miss going to her house and eating all of the junk food I was forbidden to eat at home. I told her that she would always be in my heart, that I would always try my best, and that I would always put God first just like she taught me. Lastly, I told her - as I clinged on to her with a hug - while she lovingly smoothed my hair, "La amo abuelita y no se preocupe voy a estar bien. Ya se puede ir con paz. (I love you grandma and don't worry I will be okay. You can leave with peace.)"

"Gracias mi amor, te amó mi niña. Estaré con Dios. (Thank you my love, I love you my little girl. I'll be with God.)," my grandmother whispered as she wiped my tears and slowly returned her head on my shoulder. The pain and burden I was chained with for months of worrying for the future, her future, was erased. I felt tranquility. For weeks, whenever I got home I dreaded having to sit in my living room and just observe my grandmother suffering or struggling to stay alive - anxiety constantly filled my body. I would wake up in the middle of night silently weeping from the realization that my grandmother was dying and there was absolutely NO CURE! For the longest time, resentment toward God covered me from top to bottom. Days came where I doubted that a God even existed; however, my grandmother's words: "I'll be with God" destroyed all doubt, gave reassurance, but most importantly, gave me a peace that was unbreakable, even when she finally passed away. A peace that was unbreakable, even when I touched her cold body without a pulse. A peace that was unbreakable, even when I finally had to say goodbye to her body. A peace that is still unbreakable to this day and allows me to even reminisce back to October, 2022 - the time she passed away.

Cancer might have stripped my grandmother from all formalities, but it never came close to grasping onto her faith and her character. Like my grandmother always exclaimed, "El cáncer nunca me va a ganar. (Cancer will never beat me.)"

# How do you eat an elephant? by Lily

*12th grade, North Carolina*

*Loved One's Diagnosis*

How do you eat an elephant?

“Breathe. Stay present. Everything is going to be okay.”

The words I repeated back to myself when I heard that dreaded sentence: “They think they found cancer.”

But it couldn't be? Right? She is MY mom? My protector? The strongest woman I know? The exception to such an abominable disease? She couldn't have cancer?

But woefully, my dad was honest in his delivery to me and my sisters in that hospital waiting room.

This is when that silly little saying that my mom used to say when we were kids truly came into play:

“How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!”

We, as humans, make these little reminders up to keep our minds from getting too overwhelmed with everything that life throws at us. The elephant is life, and we can only take it one day (or bite) at a time. I don't know about you, but eating a whole elephant in one bite seems greatly impossible to me.

My mom homeschooled me and my siblings throughout most of our childhoods at varying ages and so her use of this saying became habitual. It was as much of a reminder for her as it was for us. To not look too far ahead into the future, to not get overwhelmed but also to remind ourselves that tomorrow is not promised; why would we stress it?

All of that became a reality on that day in May of 2018 when my mom received that horribly dire diagnosis. That was when that saying reminding me to take it step by step became a conscious practice.

My 13-year-old brain could only process so much at one time. Does cancer mean death? Doesn't this cancer know what kind of strong woman it's dealing with? Does this mean she's going to lose her hair and become unrecognizable? Is she scared?

One bite at a time Lily. You don't know anything yet.

All I could do was stress and worry about the future. My heart dropped every morning at the reality of watching the person I loved most in this world deal with this. Deal with something that she was so undeserving of. To watch her fake her strength for her kids whom she loved with her entire being. To watch her suffer and fight to be alive.

My mom suffered from stage four Metastatic Peritoneal Carcinomatosis. This meant that what started in her stomach spread to tiny tumors that covered her abdominal wall. It couldn't be surgically removed. The cancer was deviously smart.

One bite at a time.

This cancer created free flowing malignant fluid that made it hard for her to breathe and caused the cancer to spread more rapidly.

One bite at a time.

She started chemo after trying holistic therapies first which failed in keeping a cancer this aggressive at bay. The chemo threatened her quality of life and was her last resort because of that.

One bite at a time.

Emergency hospital visits became consistently normal. Her body was deteriorating.

One bite at a time.

She bought wigs with the expectation that she would lose her hair. She never did lose her hair but seeing them on my kitchen table on mannequin heads caused the same trauma.

One day at a time.

This became our new normal. Her only option was to live with her cancer at bay. She would never be 100%. She could only coexist with the disease that shifted everything for the worse.

One day at a time.



She went in for an operation after 10 months of this battle to put in a permanent drain to drain the fluid that her cancer caused. She had already had this done before so there wasn't anything particularly alarming about this.

One day at a time.

She comes home in immense pain. Something isn't right.

One breath at a time.

She is back at the hospital by ambulance the next morning. She wasn't doing well. There was a complication with her routine procedure.

One breath at a time.

Her chemo had damaged her organs so badly that her minimally invasive procedure caused sepsis. A deathly infection.

One heartbeat at a time.

More heartbreaking news delivered woefully by my dad.

One heartbeat at a time.

“She is going to die today.”

One. Heartbeat. At. A. time.

She was supposed to be the exception. She was supposed to defeat every odd. She was supposed to live. She was supposed to watch me enter high school, graduate, and get married.

To myself I thought: “How do you eat an elephant, Lily? Stop thinking so far into the future. Be there for her. She loves you. She is worried for you more than herself. She fought so hard to stay for you. Let her go.”

I let her go. She went to be with Jesus. She is exactly where she is meant to be.

The grief could have killed me if I continued to think about everything that she would be missing. To think about all the future events that are now subject to immense pain and change because of her absence.

Her absence was obvious. The silence was deafening. There was no running away from that grief. It was undeniably real. The realization itself was enough to send me into a daily spiral.

But amid the darkness, the emptiness, the blackness, I heard my mother's voice say:

“One day at a time. That’s all you're capable of.”

She’s saving me even in death.

I am who I am because of her. She was an example of love for others, of genuine faith in the Lord, of fearlessness in trials. I strive to be like her, to be remembered one day the way she was. One day at a time.

## The Black and White Veil by Tayler

*12th grade, Colorado*

*Personal Diagnosis*

The sounds of my keyboard echo off the walls. My computer screen kindles the room. As a senior in high school, I spend a lot of my time researching and applying to colleges and scholarships. Entering my name, date of birth, my GPA and test scores. All the critical things to know about me. Or is it? My life is more than a number. But how do I show this? My eyes become heavy and my mind drifts.

“911, what’s your emergency?” Lights ignite the night and sirens blare. An otherwise healthy four year old little girl is rushed to the hospital experiencing seizures. The little girl was me. At the hospital, I was placed in a medically induced coma. The doctors watched and waited, not knowing what to do. A MRI revealed a small lesion, about the size of my pinkie nail, resting in my right temporal lobe. Unsure of what the lesion was, the best they could do was wait and watch. I was in the ICU, still in a coma. Would I wake up? If I awoke, would I have significant brain damage? Three days later at least one question was answered when I opened my eyes. I had a hard time walking and had to relearn some basic motor skills. But I was awake and learning happened fast.

Released from the hospital the plan was to go back in 6 weeks for a follow up MRI to see if the lesion was changing. My parents asked the doctors, "What if it grows"? They were assured, "Even if it's cancer, it would be highly unlikely to grow in 6 weeks." They were wrong.

Six weeks later, the lesion had grown to the size of a golf ball. I had cancer - a Glioblastoma Multiforme; stage four brain tumor. This highly aggressive cancer has less than a 20%, 5-year survival rate. I hadn't even started kindergarten and I was getting ready to become well acquainted with chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and the operating room. I started treatment immediately. Two craniotomies removed a good portion of the right temporal lobe of my brain and I began receiving radiation and chemotherapy to kill every last cancer cell in my body. Six weeks into treatment I started having headaches. Cancer isn't supposed to grow during radiation but there it was in the MRI, screaming and ugly. "We can try an experimental treatment that is being studied to see if it's safe, we can make her comfortable and let the cancer take her, or we can switch to a protocol never used for this type of cancer, but highly aggressive." Three options, but only one real choice. After a third craniotomy, I began the highly aggressive treatment described as "everything and the kitchen sink chemo." My new 5-year prognosis was now 0%. I was 4 years old, and I was dying.

After 15 months and against all odds, I completed treatment. The new protocol worked! The tumor not only was completely gone. I finished elementary school, I played with my younger brothers, and I lived the life I should have always had.

I visited the hospital annually to make sure the tumor would not come back. Despite having to keep coming back, I lived a normal happy life. Middle school began and I rose to become an honor student and excelled in my achievements. I also found a love for music and joined the orchestra, quickly becoming the principal cellist. Seventh grade arrived and during a break, I went to the mountains with my family to celebrate Thanksgiving.

The stars sparkled in the night sky. Without the stars the world around me would be swallowed by the darkness. The night was almost silent. The cool breeze barely rustled the trees. Mosquitoes buzzed around. I crawled into bed and dozed off. The next morning I awoke with a small bump on my chin. "Must be from a bug." I thought. After Thanksgiving, I came back home. The bump remained and it felt a little numb. "Maybe I was allergic to the bug bite?" We asked my oncologist, to which she responded it was probably a mix of a bug bite, and stress which kept it from healing. As time progressed, the numbness spread across my entire chin. I went to the hospital and got my annual brain MRI. This time including my face.

“She has a tumor. We don't know if it is cancer but we do know that it is crushing her jaw.” We scheduled a biopsy to hopefully confirm that the tumor was benign. I kept telling myself it was nothing. But deep down I couldn't believe that. “She has cancer.” These three words echoed in my mind. The young girl I once was did not understand these words. Now 13 years old, I wished I was her. I wished I did not understand. My mind became clouded and dark. “Why? Why again? Why now?” I was diagnosed with Osteosarcoma on the right side of my jaw - a direct result of the radiation I had 9 years prior. Osteosarcoma is a form of bone cancer most commonly found in younger children and typically grows in the bones within the leg. Once again I was submerged in treatment. More chemotherapy, more surgery, and more hospital visits. Because the tumor was quite literally consuming my bone, surgeons removed the right side of my jaw and used the fibula from my right leg, and a titanium plate to replace it.

There was one major difference with this diagnosis; I was in middle school and wanted to keep caught up on work. I yearned to be normal and was determined to not let cancer affect my learning even if I couldn't go to school. I had a teacher come to the hospital, where I was more often than not. She taught me and I not only learned, but continued to academically exceed expectations. Another year passed and I completed treatment. Again.

Today, I am a senior in high school. While I have been done with treatment for 4 years now, my fight against cancer will never end. I now go to the hospital twice a year. There, I endured two MRI's, one focused on my brain and one on my entire body. A lung x-ray, a blood test, a physical exam, echocardiogram, and sometimes more. This will continue for the rest of my life. Now, along with frequent hospital visits I also live with major side effects. Due to how harsh both my treatments were, I am deaf out of my right ear, the right side of my face is partially paralyzed and has gone completely numb from severe nerve damage. I also have below average performing kidneys, and even trouble walking sometimes due to my fibula being taken out.

Now you might ask, how do I keep track of everything I've been through? Well, for every individual treatment I received a color coordinated bead that represents a medical procedure. A white colored bead represents rounds of chemotherapy - I have 228. Magenta represents Emergency/ICU visits - I have 6. Rounds of radiation - 33. Respiratory support - 18. I have had over 14 surgeries. In total I have over two thousand of these beads and I'm still counting. I should have none. I shouldn't even know these beads exist, yet I do. I have memorized every bead's purpose. What each color represents. Every suffrage I've been through and still am.

A shiver runs through my spine. I woke up in a cold sweat. My computer screen, touched only by the fingertips of a ghost, remains still. A ringing pulses through my ears. A dream, or more like reality, resurfaced. After my second diagnosis, and even in between the two, I have pushed myself to achieve my best. Since 6th grade I have received an honor roll each semester. I am a cellist; student and teacher. An advanced dancer, with ballet pointe shoes despite my disability. Two-year standing in National Honor Society and three-year standing in Tri-M National Music Honor Society. I am also a thirteen-year ambassador for a childhood cancer research program and have given multiple news interviews to raise awareness for childhood cancer. In my free time I enjoy spending time with my friends and family and being as “normal” as I can. Yes, my name, date of birth, test scores, and GPA are important. Especially when applying to colleges. But my grit and desire to never give up is more important. My ability to trudge through the amber glowing coal that lies beneath my feet, and come out stronger than I was before is what defines me.

The white screen reflects off my eyes. The black numbers in front of me. Taunting me. Impersonating me. These numbers are not who I am. These numbers, together as one, become a black and white veil. A veil that attempts to conceal my true self.

## Stage 7 by Tyler

*12th grade, Illinois  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

Today you'll be taking a multiple-choice exam on: Parental Loss. We will give you context, ask seven questions, each on a stage of grief, read each answer choice carefully and circle the answer choice that best answers the question.

For context, your mom was perfect, or at least she was from behind the rose-colored glasses called childhood. She was a therapist, social worker and was working towards a degree in nursing. Obviously, empathy and compassion were in her nature. She was bigger than life and your hero, so “We lost your mom this morning” is the last thing you'd ever want to hear, which is why it's the first thing seared into your memory of March 27th, 2021.

Question one; You arrive at your mom's house, the familiar feeling is gone, and there'd never been this many people in your loft. The way they were standing felt like they

carved a path to your mom's room which guided you to her like an usher in a silent church. You make it to the doorway and think, "She couldn't have passed; there's too much light in this room, seems too happy." You sit in the chair you'd placed next to her bed on your last visit, and you stare at her chest, waiting for it to rise, to show signs of breathing, of life, of anything but death.

The last action was which of the following? A: Anger & Bargaining. B: Shock & Denial. C: Reconstruction & Working Through. D: Acceptance. The correct answer is B.

Question two; Later that week you're sitting on the air mattress in your dad's attic; no, it's your attic now. You're sitting on the air mattress in your attic, thinking of every instance of stress YOU caused your mother. Every time YOU were too loud playing games, every time YOU didn't wake up on time, every time YOU took too long to respond when she called YOU, everything YOU could have done better, every action YOU made that zapped her of her strength, strength she could have used to fight cancer.

What is this thought process an example of? A: Reconstruction & Working Through. B: Depression. C: Pain & Guilt. D: The Upward Turn. The correct answer is C.

Question three; You studied Philosophy when you were younger and grew up in a Christian household, so Epicurus, the man who said God could not be omnipotent and omnibenevolent, was particularly interesting. You used to disagree with Epicurus completely, but if God is purely good and all-powerful, why is your mom dead? Why would a being who knew cancer would fester in her body not stop it? It's God's fault. Yeah, it's God's fault.

What is this thought process an example of? A: The Upward Turn. B: Acceptance. C: Depression. D: Anger & Bargaining. The correct answer is D

Question four; Just like every other high school, yours holds homecoming annually. And annually, you go to Bryce's house, your best friend since kindergarten. Obviously, there is a depressing undertone this year, but that's expected. The night is going smoothly, laughing and joking until you hear, "Turn around so I can take a picture," being hollered from the car. It's Bryce's mom. Immediately it hits you; your mom will never be here for the important moments in your life, not a single one. Soon after you get inside, you break down in the bathroom and blubber, "She's gone, and she's never coming back. She didn't even see me turn eighteen."

What is this event an example of? A: Shock & Denial. B: Depression. C: Pain & Guilt. D: Acceptance. The correct answer is B.

Question five; You stop having as many moments of extreme emotion and find yourself reflecting on your mom and what she did. Particularly the nights at your great-grandpa's house, watching and hearing her infectious laughter as everyone drank and played cards. You feel like you can't leave all that behind; you have to get back to your friends and family because they're the people that can help you. They're what matters most through all this.

This change is an example of what? A: The Upward Turn. B: Acceptance. C: Reconstruction & Working Through. D: Depression. The correct answer is A.

Question six; Pre-med, Pre-law, and Psychology have been the majors you couldn't choose between since you were ten. And your mother was supposed to decide for you essentially, but considering she isn't here, it's up to you. And anytime you go to think about college, you end up thinking about your mom. But you find that ends up helping; she's your inspiration and why you decided to major in Psychology. Between her working as a therapist and your struggles with your mental health since she passed, you decided you want to fight to help others with their mental health issues.

What is this an example of? A: Reconstruction & Working Through. B: Depression. C: Pain & Guilt. D: Acceptance. The correct answer is A.

Question seven; My name is Tyler Tharpe, and I lost my mother when I was 16. I would love to say I'm better or happy, but we all know I'll probably never get back to the point of happiness. Death always felt like this distant concept that happened to my grandparent's cousins and siblings. To have it slam into you like a freight train is a feeling words can't convey. And with that shock comes every one of the stages of grief, each one changing me forever, but in the end, I came out with a new appreciation for the family I still had and a passion for following in my mom's footsteps and maybe becoming half the person she was. I've learned to accept what happened and make it a part of me and my drive for my future.

What stage of grief is mentioned in the last sentence? A: The Upward Turn. B: Acceptance. C: Anger & Bargaining. D: Depression. The correct answer is B.

# The Last Look by Bailey

*12th grade, Washington  
Loved One's Diagnosis*

I was watching an old video of myself; I was four or five years old. As I was watching a wave of sadness ran through me. That little girl in the video was just... happy. She had no knowledge all the tragedies she would endure in the next decade. I realized that I was feeling sorry for myself. I quickly closed my laptop, stopping the video and went and sat next to my mom on the couch. Time is so bizarre, at times I still feel like a child, able to cuddle my mom and it not be considered "weird." But I am eighteen now, so I just sit next to her.

I have two older sisters that have a different dad than I do. Their dad wasn't in their life. My mom was single with two children when she met my biological dad. He knew that she was dependent, so he took advantage of her. He treated her badly, abused and manipulated her. The final straw was when she was pregnant with me, he was on top of her choking her. My eldest sister, who was six, jumped on his back, put him in a chokehold and squeezed her heels into his side. He got off my mom and left the house angry. My mom left with only a bag of clothes, her daughters, and drove two hours straight to my grandma's house on a quarter tank of gas.

When I was a few weeks old my mom found a job at a local feed store. This construction worker would come in every now and then to buy dog food. One time my mom had to bring all three of us to work with her when my grandma could not watch us. On this day that construction worker just happened to walk in. The man, who my mom had established a rather good relationship with, saw my mom having to bring her three little kids to work with her. He offered to stay at work with her and watch over us until she got off. This turned into us eventually being babysat by him, and then moving in with him and then him adopting me and becoming my dad.

My dad worked ridiculously hard; he helped my mom kick off her career of being a horse trainer from home. With my mom working at home, my parents thought it would be best to homeschool my sisters and me. My dad helped teach us, he pushed us with our gymnastics and our horses, but most importantly loved our mom and set the example for what we should expect for the rest of our life. But happiness is not permanent. My dad lost his job, and we were forced to live in my grandpa's garage for two years. We kept our horses at a friends, and we quit gymnastics. Finally, my dad



found a house big enough to each have our own room and have our horses at home. He went back to school to become a lineman. He graduated top of his class. He was tired of living paycheck to paycheck, so he landed a job in Texas, mind you we live in Washington state. In order to save the maximum amount of money he could, my 6'4 dad slept in his Volkswagen Passat every night after working twelve-to-fifteen-hour shifts.

I woke up one morning and my dad was home! I was so happy after not seeing him for months, he even missed Christmas... so why was he home? He was home because he was having severe symptoms of being sick and awful back pain. My dad blew it off as sleeping in his car and eating fast food the last few months, but his boss told him to come home, and he needed a break. My mom drove him to our local clinic and an hour later showed back up to the house very anxiously saying they were going to the hospital and something serious was going on. My parents did not come home that night, instead we all went to a hospital where we would be staying every night for the next five weeks. My dad was diagnosed with stage four melanoma, he had about six tumors and he was developing bone cancer, starting in his spine. They gave him three months to live.

I was only eight at the time and I didn't know what was to come, all I knew was that my dad was extremely sick. The hospital nurses were my friends, sometimes I couldn't sleep, and I would go and hangout with them. We spent easter in the hospital and the nurse's hid eggs around the oncology floor so we could have an easter egg hunt. The most memorable moment in the hospital was my mom and dad finally getting married. They married in the hospital's garden area outside. They never had the money to get married before but always planned to. So, with time not in our favor, they threw together the most beautiful wedding a hospital has ever had.

We transferred my dad to Seattle for better treatment. I noticed my mom sipping whiskey she had hidden in the truck. Seattle was different than our local hospital. The nurses were rude to us and there definitely was no playing. We weren't even allowed to stay at the hospital with him. After two weeks of being in Seattle my dad made an extremely hard decision. There was no curing him or chance of him getting better, he hated the hospital and wanted to be in his own bed, at his own house. So, after six weeks of being in the hospital we all moved home. My mom took care of him like no other, along with my eldest sister Emily, who was only fifteen.

I saw things I wish I didn't, such as my dad getting his catheter changed, my mom changing his depends. I helped bathe him and I watched as he suffered from seizures. He started hallucinating and although he was still alive, he wasn't really conscious. My mom had his bed completely railed off and one night he somehow found the strength to pull himself over and he landed on the hard wood floor, he had ripped his diaper off and

had an accident all over the floor. He wasn't verbal anymore, but I'll never forget the sadness in his eyes when he saw me witnessing him. He was so skinny, nothing but skin and bones. About two weeks before he passed away, he had a burst of energy and somehow my mom managed to understand he wanted to go outside. We saw him smile, move around and pet the horses. We had a horse that was only a few weeks old, and my dad was the happiest I had seen him in months, loving that horse.

June 29th, 2013, my dad lost his fight. I was asleep on the couch when I woke up to my mom quietly crying in the kitchen. I rushed over to her and asked why she was crying. All she could say was "Daddies gone... daddies gone" repeatedly while she held me. I went into his room where his body was. His eyes were wide open. I tried to close them like they do in movies, but I couldn't. I sobbed while I held his head and kissed his cheeks. My dad was dead. I fell asleep and woke up to my sisters in the room with me along with my uncle and the dieners to pick up his corpse. My uncle had to physically grab me off his body and carry me to another bedroom on the other side of the house. I wasn't ready to say goodbye and I will never get that back. The last look I have of him was taken away from me. The house was so quiet, empty. Just us four girls again. The most incredible thing happened, we were all outside taking care of the animals on a 78-degree day when it started hailing. We all started laughing. We knew he was saying goodbye.

Since then, he has appeared in many ways. His old T.V. turning to static mid show, a week after him passing. Objects flying across rooms. Crazy of all, whenever I was nervous or an important event was happening, a special song we sang to him his whole battle, would come on the radio. My mom struggled with alcoholism, and it was extremely tough, but she hasn't had a drink in two years. We got evicted from our house but fortunately after being homeless again we found a forever home. Life has been hard, and we still live in poverty but I'm so thankful for the construction man who took my family in and gave me a strong foundation. It'll be ten years this June and not a day has gone by I haven't thought of my dad.