

Cancer Pathways
CANCER UNWRAPPED
TEEN WRITING CONTEST

2024 EDITION

*A collection of heartfelt stories
written by teens facing cancer.*

For 18 years we have been asking teens to tell us how cancer has impacted their lives through our Cancer Unwrapped Teen Writing Contest. Over 9,000 teens across the U.S. have taken the time to put their experience in honest and heartfelt writing. Each story is unique. We hear stories of triumph and stories of great loss, stories written in times of turbulence, and stories written in times of quiet reflection.

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

We 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.

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

We've been a leader in empowering and educating teens on healthy behavior and choices that can reduce their cancer risk and improve health. For 18 years we've provided a platform for teens to wield the power of the pen to change the world so we can better understand each person's encounter with cancer. Visit us online at: www.cancerpathways.org

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A letter to a Memory by Emma H.

Loved one's diagnosis

Dear mom,

I apologize for not writing sooner, time really does fly when you're busy! It's only been 5 years since I last saw you and yet it feels like you were never here to begin with.

You've missed a lot more than I anticipated. There's so much I want to tell you, but then we'd both just be here forever trying to get through this letter. I wish you could just stop by so we could sit together on my bed and talk about everything like we used to do, but we both know that's no longer possible. I was sure my life would end the day you left, so I waited patiently for you to return. The leaves fell from the trees. Snow soon wrapped the bare branches in a white blanket. Eventually, the sun shone from behind the clouds and the green leaves sprouted once more. It didn't take long to realize that the world would move on without me if I didn't try to keep up. So that's what I did. Time went by, and before I knew it you were sealed away into the past.

It's hard to admit it, and Dad hates it when I say this, but I'm beginning to forget everything about you. You were the first person in my life, and still, time slowly eats away at our memories, leaving nothing but scraps for me to rummage through. Dad was watching a video the other day. A woman was calling out my name. I couldn't recognize the voice until he told me it was you. The word "mom", no longer rings any bells. It loses more meaning every day that passes by without you. I guess it really has been a while.

Don't worry though, I haven't completely forgotten about our time spent together. I still feel a dull pain in my heart whenever I'm reminded of you. Sometimes it's just little things that make the bittersweet memories resurface. It took a while, but I began to visit the Asian Grocery Stores we would always go to. Staring at all the pre-packaged Korean food, I can't help but remember all the meals you'd make for me as a kid. I'm sorry I took everything for granted, I just never thought there would be a day that I'd be eating your cooking for the last time. Your love lives on through the countless kimbap rolls and bulgogi wraps you forced down my picky throat. One of my friends shows me the sweet texts her mom sends her during school. Remember when we would text like that? I scroll through our messages once in a while to remind me of the way things once were. It

usually wasn't anything serious, but I still miss every part of it. Hidden between all the random stickers we spammed each other with are actual conversations. I'd send you a picture of some art I made or maybe a doll I wanted and you'd tell me your opinion. You'd check up on me, asking how my day was or if my brother and I were studying like we were supposed to. When you were away, you'd always send me a text saying "I love you!" followed by all the heart and kissy-faced emojis you loved to use. My eyes always water when I reach the end of our chats. I don't know if I'll ever find someone who cared about me the way you once did. Even your simplest texts meant the world to me, and they still do.

Sometimes the reminders hurt a little more. We recently covered Cell Communication in AP Biology. My teacher warned us that cancer would be a common topic due to its correlation with the unit. I like to think I'm strong and that I'm over it, but I can't help but pick the skin off my fingers whenever she begins talking about those forever-replicating cells. We began to travel again recently. Less than a year after you left, Dad took us to our favorite spot in Orlando, Florida. It was our first trip without you, going back to a place we all knew and loved. I don't think my mind could handle the overwhelming sense of emptiness I felt from your absence combined with the joy of finally being able to see Dad again after the months he spent with you during chemo. I found myself bursting into tears uncontrollably, but we still managed to have a great time.

I'll tell you a secret though. What gets me the most is simply seeing a full family in public. Their joy reminds me of everything pancreatic cancer took from us, but more importantly, what it took from you. You had a tough past, working so hard to give my brother and me a better childhood than yours. There were so many things you wanted to do and so many places you wanted to go. If only you had more time to enjoy the world in its entirety. We could grow old together and create lifelong memories. Now, the only thing we can do is dream.

You've become nothing more than a distant memory to me. My clearest image of you was formed by our last moments together, something I could never forget even if I tried. We were in the hospice you had recently been sent to. Your frail motionless body rested on the bed, hooked up to all the machines. I spent most of the time trying to smile, hoping you couldn't see me staring at my shoes. It was impossible to look you in the eyes without crying because deep down I knew this would probably be the last time I saw you alive. And it was. I would do anything to see you happy and healthy one last time. I'm sure it's how you'd want to be remembered too.

Sorry for rambling a bit there. I didn't want to end on a melancholy note, but it's hard not to get sad when I remember our life before you left. You've missed so much and will only continue to miss more. You died when I was in 7th grade. I'm in 12th grade now. The harsh reality of the world has smacked me in the face like a splash of cold water. Life is unfair, and there's nothing we can do about that. The only options are to persevere or quit. You were so many things, but a quitter wasn't one of them. I know you would've wanted me to push forward, so I've tried my best to do so. In 4 months, I'll be walking across the stage to receive my high school diploma. In a few more months, I'll be moving to Massachusetts to pursue a major in Biochemistry and Microbiology at Boston University. It's taken some time, but the past has begun to loosen its grip on me. The future I've been working towards becomes a bit more visible each day yet deep down, I still feel like the same little girl holding back tears at your bedside.

In the grand scheme of things, everything and everyone will be forgotten. All memories will be washed away by the waves of time, I just wish I could've held onto ours a bit longer. I'm sorry Mom.

Love,
Emma



A Promise by Ishita A.

Loved one's diagnosis

13,395 kilometers, 8,448 miles, 15 hours. Oceans, mountains, and several promises away. The distance becomes more than mere miles; it transforms into a poignant metaphor for the emotional spaces that divide me from the familiar warmth of India. The celebrations missed, the everyday interactions lost, and the shared laughter that fades into the background of time, all serve as poignant reminders of the vast expanse that separates us. When my best friend was diagnosed with cancer I was too young to realize that death was a facade that stood as a symbol of grief and loss, and not just a chapter of a book that could simply fade away as I shut it out. In 2017, living in Indiana, I was 13,395 kilometers, 8,448 miles, and 15 hours away from holding my best friend's hand. The hand I knew was colorless and blistered but full of so much youth and the unfairness of it all.

Growing up, My family and I would visit India every other year and stay for 2 months. It became such a consistent part of my life. I never understood that the people I saw so little of had lives and obstacles of their own up until I reached the age of 10. We visited the people we had been separated from every second our feet remained on the rich soil of our motherland, however, our laughter and contentment rooted back to Aryan Srivastav and his family. They had known my parents for several years, even before my parents immigrated to America, making them not only the kindest souls, but the most supportive and considerate of them all. They would greet and welcome us to India with the softest smiles and the tastiest sweets, helping us realize how much of a relief it was to be in our true home. My home specifically, was built up of warm hazelnut eyes that shrunk with every cracked joke, dark hair that threaded through the very wind that lifts dreamers off their feet, and a smile that stood as a symbol of pearlescent beams in a tranquil sea, masterpiece in every curve and line. Aryan was two years older than me, he understood the life I hadn't lived, he saw fear and worry in eyes that I couldn't recognize, but it never affected the symphony of childhood that bestowed itself within us every night spent together. Living right next door to each other, I would climb over the ledge of my patio to reach his, and we would spend every other summer of our childhood intertwined in thoughts, ideas and imaginations. We spent the hot mornings picking the sun-colored mangos off the trees while digging your sandals into the sand. We took the chance to shut our eyes and entrance ourselves with the smell of fresh bread lathered in oil with the mixture of the horizon's distinct art hovering over the houses that

reach the skies. Spending just a couple of months each year with him became a cherished ritual, a brief yet profound chapter that felt like everything I had ever needed. I never thought about leaving, I never thought about how it would feel to say farewell to everything I had ever known. Why? I knew I would be able to experience this again. I knew I would come back before I blinked, and I would experience this for yet another summer. I knew him and I would be with each other forever.

I thought I would be able to experience this again. I thought I would come back before I blinked, and I would experience this for yet another summer. I thought he and I would be with each other forever. Aryan was diagnosed with leukemia at age 12, and unfortunately he lost his life to a battle that was never his to win within the same year. The distance that stood as pillars between harder to push away every day that had gone by. That year between seeing his hazelnut eyes became a year that distorted the precious years of childhood into days that would repeat themselves in a torturing manner. The same agony, the same regret, and the same confusion became the ink that made its way into my veins. The inability to provide the same happiness he had given me over the years created an unparalleled heartache that extended beyond the miles that separate us. As I lay next to him on his bed in my floral pink dress, making my dolls fly in the sky above us, he would remind me, "Main ise banaoonga taaki aapako kabhee bhee aansoo na bahaana pade, yah ek vaada hai." His words still ring in my ear, translating to, "I'll make it so you never have to shed a tear, that's a promise," Till this day, I wish I would have been able to make such a promise.

I wish I would've been able to keep it.

As a 15 year old now, I knew that at the age of 10, I constantly thought of how the wave of death washed away the light of memories. "Aryan, please don't leave yet," I would have begged, "I'm still a child." The reality till this day remains, he was too, still a child. Only 12 years of quiet laughs and fleeting smiles during phone calls that lasted until the stars would open their eyes. 12 years of childhood, and then suddenly an eternity of life with no trace at all. There is no good trail, no good choice, no way to feel better in the short term that doesn't kill you in the long term. I couldn't see the face of my dying best friend. I couldn't look into his alive eyes for the last time. Death makes a cavern in your chest to live in, it never leaves, and wraps around the warmth of a beating heart. I can't imagine what he's feeling. Does he remember me? I knelt down on the wood outside my parent's room, scratching up my weak knees, pressing my ear against the door. I heard my

mothers' false promises turn into fear. I heard the urgency in my dad's voice. I heard his cry for Aryans' family to accept money to help with his treatment. They refused. They refused? My dad, wise and prudent, sensed the silent cries, the unspoken woes in the air. Unlike myself, he was aware of the burden that pushed his family further and further down a path of cold and bleak air. They refused?

No money could reverse what had permanently claimed every inch of his youthful body and mind in such little time.

As a 15 year old now, I knew that at the age of 10, I would've shed a tear looking at a home that was once his. Ours. However, I still go to India every other year even today, hand in hand with my mom and dad who seemed to have fought the same battle as me, with a smile. I stand in between my home and his, digging my sandals into the sand and entrancing myself with the smell of fresh bread lathered in oil, just like the olden days, right? I look into the sky and wonder why I'm not crying looking at the ledge I had climbed over, or the window that he had broken during cricket. How could I forget? How could I be so silly? Of course I know why, I'll always know why.

Aryan Srivastav was notorious for keeping his promises.



A Sibling's Perspective of Childhood Cancer by Nicole L.

Loved one's diagnosis

When my four-year old sister Jocelyn was diagnosed with spinal cancer in 2014, our family's lives took an unexpected turn. The news of her illness was like a tornado, tearing through our peaceful existence and leaving us battling with a new reality we never expected. Our lives would never be the same again.

Being the sister of a sibling who battled childhood cancer was an emotional journey filled with ups and downs. Despite my sister's frequent hospital visits or her time spent in my mother's bed, we always made a point to prioritize our precious moments together. From playing with our newest American Girl dolls to solving tedious puzzles, we created new experiences I still continue to cherish. While our playtime provided a temporary escape, we couldn't break out of the occasional reminder of the challenging circumstances my sister faced. She dealt with the physical demands of grueling chemotherapy treatments, keeping her in the hospital for days on end. As the treatments took their toll, she gradually lost her ability to walk and her once vibrant interest in play began to diminish.

Throughout Jocelyn's illness, I struggled with a desire for attention, longing to be seen and recognized among the overwhelming focus on her. It wasn't that I resented her or wished ill upon her, but the constant attention and concern directed towards her left me feeling unnoticed and overlooked by my entire family. As Jocelyn faced the challenges of her illness, our family's attention naturally moved towards her needs. Understandably, her health became the central focus of our lives, leaving little space for my own desires and struggles. It was difficult not to crave for the same level of attention and support my sister received.

When a stomach bug landed me in the emergency room, it was my aunt and grandma who stepped up to take care of me. With my mother already at the hospital tending to Jocelyn's illness, I could sense the heaviness in her presence as she finally arrived in my room. It felt as though my own sickness—minor vomiting and a stomach ache—paled in comparison to the immensity of my sister's battle with cancer. In her eyes, I could see the strain of worry and

exhaustion, and it seemed as if my sickness was unimportant, as if I were wasting her precious time. The weight of guilt and insignificance settled upon me, leaving me grappling with the unfairness of the situation. There were many moments when I felt invisible, as if my own emotions and experiences were brushed aside. Birthdays, achievements, and even typical daily activities seemed to be less significant in comparison to the importance of my sister's condition. It felt as though I had become a side character in the story of our family, solely a background figure while my sister took the center of the stage.

Years later, I now understand that my family's focus on Jocelyn's health was not intentional to diminish my own needs. It was a response to the seriousness of her illness. Recognizing this has helped me find compassion and forgiveness, both for myself and for my family. While my desire for attention during that time was valid, I have come to realize that it is not solely through others' validation that I can find comfort. During the most somber moments I felt alone, I validated my own feelings and prioritized my own demands. I was there for myself and that is what matters most.

The journey of being the sister to a younger sister with cancer has left a permanent mark on my life. Through the passing of my sister Jocelyn, I have come to understand the profound value of cherishing every moment, embracing compassion for others and myself and finding resilience in the face of adversity. Her love and strength continue to inspire me, and while I deeply miss her presence, I carry her spirit with me as a reminder of the precious time we shared and the enduring impact she has had on my life.



A Tale of Love, Loss, and Cancer's Unyielding Grip by Gunner A.

Loved one's diagnosis

A little boy is happy his Papa is coming to watch his soccer game. He is his idol, like a second father. For the past 12 years, all he has known is his funny, charismatic Papa who would do anything for him. His memories are filled with the many trips to Toys R Us, fun-filled adventures at Disney World, and the lazy days of summer spent at his Gulf Shores beach condo. Yes, the little boy's Papa only had one rule that echoed through the little boy's mind: "When you are with Papa, there are no rules at all!"

The boy runs up in excitement to talk to his Papa, but something is different. The little boy can sense that his Papa is struggling to get the words out of his mouth. His Papa's speech is slow and stuttered; it's a minimal difference but enough to cause concern in the boy's head. So many questions, so many things he's wondering because he sees his Papa's struggle to convey his messages. He wonders why his Papa struggles to walk. Why are his parents having to help him around?

Little did the boy know, his cherished Papa, his idol and source of love, had embarked on a harrowing 2-year battle with cancer—a battle destined to end in heartbreaking defeat.

The boy and his Papa usually spent tons of time together. Hadn't Papa been there to take him to every single swim lesson? Hadn't Papa been the one to whisk him away on fantasy vacations to Disney World at a moment's notice? Wasn't Papa always the one to babysit him when he was sick and couldn't go to school? For as long as the little boy could remember, Papa had always been there through good times and bad. He could never recall a time when Papa wasn't a major part of his life. However, after that soccer game, days went by without him. And then months. The boy longed for his Papa who brought a sense of joy and excitement with him and soon started asking questions to his parents. The boy's parents realized they couldn't hide the boy from reality any longer and told the boy his Papa had cancer. You see, a glioblastoma had formed in his Papa's brain, taking over his control center. It was aggressive and growing rapidly. The boy didn't fully comprehend the situation, but he knew it was bad. He could see it in his father's eyes as he was

told the news. He could feel it because of the absence of his Papa's presence over the last few months. He stepped into the shower, seeking solace in its comforting embrace, letting the water wash away the weight of his tears. In that moment of vulnerability, he grappled with the overwhelming emotions, desperately attempting to make sense of the profound meaning behind his Papa's ensuing battle with cancer.

Over the course of the two-year fight, the boy visited his Papa's house. However, he was rarely allowed inside because of the risk of spreading Covid. The boy would stand on the porch, and his Papa would sit in a wheelchair in the doorway of the home. Sometimes the Papa would attempt to stand to appear more able-bodied than he was, but watching him struggle just made it worse. His Papa now had only a fraction of the speaking abilities he used to possess. Every word was a struggle, often difficult to understand. The boy yearned to listen to the stories his Papa used to recount repeatedly, but that possibility was no longer within reach. Instead of the amusing tales like "Killer ducks at the campground" or "when the family was disgraced because Aunt Kelly wouldn't go down the big slide," his Papa had to battle his own brain to articulate the right words, a battle often lost. The boy witnessed the frustration, sadness, and humility that enveloped Papa during these moments. Papa, a proud and strong man, always admired by everyone, didn't want the boy to remember him in such a state. So, he began to distance himself in an effort to preserve a more dignified image in the young boy's memory. After a while, the boy realized the fight against cancer was unwinnable, and the inevitable end was approaching.

One day the boy appeared home from school; his house was quiet and felt almost still. He sat his bags down and sat in his room for a bit until it was time for dinner. His family gathered around the table, but they didn't speak like they usually do. Eventually, the boy's father told him and his brother their Papa had lost his fight. The boy's memories with his Papa flooded his mind while simultaneously fighting back tears. After the evening meal, the boy found refuge in the shower to express his emotions once again. It was his first genuine encounter with the loss of a loved one, and the pain was profound. Despite his efforts to appear strong, he couldn't hold back, and the rest of the night seemed to drag on endlessly.

The boy in the story is me, Gunner Atkins. I grappled with the idea of crafting a conclusion that offered a "light at the end of the tunnel," but upon reflection, I opted against it. The truth is for many, cancer is something inescapable. It slowly breaks you down until you're a shell of what you once were. Confronting this harsh truth is emotionally grueling, requiring a resilience that often

goes unnoticed. The only relief at the end of this difficult journey is the end of the suffering caused by the battle against cancer. It would be denying the reality of cancer if I were to add some kind of happiness to this essay, which is something I refuse to do.

Cancer doesn't just affect the person diagnosed; it ripples through the lives of their loved ones, turning ordinary moments into poignant memories and testing their resilience in the face of relentless pain. It leaves an enduring mark, emphasizing the fragility and preciousness of life. I love you Papa.



Cancer Is a Ticking-Time Bomb by Charlie B

Loved one's diagnosis

I am not a stranger to the smell of hospitals. That acrid scent, masked by chemicals, wafts in the air and is almost always accompanied by the gentle beeping of monitors. Sitting in the waiting room, observing people passing by. Entering the hospital room, gripping my mother's hand, trying to stay calm, staring at the person who cared for me my entire life, and being told that he might not even make it the next day. I experienced all of this at five years old when my father had a massive heart attack. The monitors were reminiscent of a ticking time bomb with each beep, knowing that any moment could be our last moment together. Thankfully, he recovered, and the ticking stopped. I was convinced that nothing else could take my dad away from me...

Tick-Tock.

...Until he got diagnosed with prostate cancer three years later, and I could suddenly hear the ticking once again. I was devastated, but I knew that no matter what, I had to be the one to stay strong. So, despite my feelings, I was the resilient one. Even when I saw the hospital bills. Even when I heard my father talk about the treatments. Even when I received compliments for “how well I was handling it” or “how mature I was.” I wore many faces while chasing an impossible sense of normality to keep myself from crumbling.

Tick-Tock.

Surgery. Doctors. Hospitals. Medicines. Bills. Treatments.

I was around eleven years old when I heard the words Metastatic Cancer. I couldn't believe it. My dad had told me that he wasn't ever going to give up; he was too stubborn to allow cancer to get the best of him. He promised that he wouldn't get worse. I remember staring at the blue hue of my phone screen at 3am, wishing that Google would tell me something else. Something about a cure or a miracle recovery. I didn't sleep that night, my paranoia getting the best of me. I had to be resilient, so I picked myself up and continued on to the next day, comforting my family members. I felt like a shaken bottle of soda, ready to burst open.

Tick-Tock.

Mysterious tumor. I laughed after my mom had told me. Of course, on top of my father's shots, he now had a mysterious tumor threatening to spread cancer to other places. More hospital bills meant more stress on my parents, more specifically, more stress on my dad. Cancer wasn't kind, especially when I was almost twelve, and we struggled financially. Cancer was even more unkind when we received news that the doctors were unable to reach the tumor to see whether or not it was cancerous. I felt the weight of everything I had kept carefully bottled up breaking open. I locked myself in my room and sobbed into my pillow.

Tick-Tock.

I used to fight with my dad constantly. We both tend to be incredibly stubborn and set in our ways, but we usually make up with each other quickly. However, this fight was different. I was thirteen and going through countless emotions, so I got easily frustrated at my dad when he asked me to clean my room. We yelled at each other and said a lot of really harsh things. After the fight, I went to talk to him, and we had a long conversation about his cancer. I was lying on his bed beside him while he told me the exact words he said to me when he was first diagnosed: "I'm too stubborn to give up." I wiped the tears from my eyes, hiding my face so he wouldn't worry. Afterward, I began cleaning my room, dazed by what had transpired. It wasn't until later that I processed what he had revealed to me: if his cancer happened to spread again to his lymph nodes, then that would most likely be the end.

Tick-Tock

I am seventeen years old now, and my father has been diagnosed with cancer for 9 years. It's terrifying, the ups and downs. The surgeries and the doctor visits pile up into bills on our kitchen table. I know that every doctor visit is delaying the inevitable and that my father is too far along for a miracle. I know that the bomb is still ticking even now. I know this should be a story of growth or a miracle, but cancer doesn't give miracles. Cancer takes until there is nothing left.

A few months ago, my uncle was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. An incurable, commonly late-diagnosed, and rapid form of cancer. Another ticking bomb, but this one ticks faster. My uncle lives in another state, and we often don't have the financial means to drive down to visit.

Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock. I am waiting for a miracle or an answer. Why do two of my closest family members have cancer? Will they get to see me graduate college? Will my dad walk with me down the aisle at my wedding? Will my uncle ever get to taste-test coffee with me again?

I wish I could say that these things are possible, but cancer is a ticking time bomb, and you never know when it is going to explode.



Eye of the Storm by Kale I.

Personal Diagnosis

The echo of the closing laptop lid marked the end of my first year of high school, characterized by isolation and a yearning for normalcy. As I stepped onto the bustling campus for the first time as a sophomore, I felt excitement wash over me. Finally, I was experiencing the "real" high school life I had dreamt of. However, this dream soon became a waking nightmare. Towards the end of the first semester, my eyesight, which had always been good, began deteriorating. Initially, I attributed it to the strain of online learning, but the ongoing loss of vision in my right eye shattered my complacency.

First, there were appointments with my optometrist, who monitored the situation. When the condition began to grow worse, it led us to our local hospital and the emergency room, enduring a barrage of tests and being shuttled between emergency trauma hospitals via an ambulance, as our local hospital did not have the proper working equipment to evaluate my condition thoroughly.

The verdict finally arrived late on the evening of January 4, 2022. It was a tumor. I heard the emergency hospital doctor explain that he could not give us further details as it was outside his specialty, so he said we would need to travel to a Children's Hospital. I remember him saying, "Go home and sleep well tonight so you can get up early and travel tomorrow." If I was not already lost in a wave of emotions, I might have laughed as I thought, "How could one sleep after getting that kind of news?"

On January 5, 2022, my parents and I woke up early for the three-hour drive to Valley Children's Hospital in Madera, California. The drive was silent as each of us questioned what would come next. When you hear the word "tumor," you begin thinking of other terms that accompany that one, such as cancer, benign, malignant, terminal, and surgery.

During the driving time, we sat silently, reflecting on what could be coming next. As I sat in the back of the car, watching my parents. I could see their faces reflected in the rearview mirror; both lost in a wave of emotions. My parents already lost a child years ago, and I know how much it still hurts them both; grieving a child is not part of the circle of life.

A tumor means cancer, or at least that is the story of my family's history with tumors. So I knew, too, that the silence in the car that day was a reflection of my parents thinking about other members of the family lost to tumors that were cancer.

My Dad was thinking of his father, who had died from a cancerous tumor in his throat; my mother was reflecting on her maternal grandmother, who had died after a two-year battle with lung cancer that eventually spread to her brain, and I was thinking of my PopPop (adopted grandfather) who we had lost in September of 2018, after his short battle with kidney cancer.

PopPop was the father figure my mom desperately needed growing up. Raised by a single parent and as an only child, my mother latched onto the neighbors down the street, which gave that little girl a real sense of family. As his seven sons called him, Pop often served as her father figure for most of her life. By the time the "grandchildren" in that family began arriving, Pop became PopPop, and for me and my sibling, it is the only grandfather I knew growing up, too. His battle with cancer and death shut me down emotionally, and in the days after his death, I secretly decided never to love someone like that again because I didn't want to hurt so much after losing them.

The three-hour drive was a crucible of introspection for me. I reflected on my life, realizing I had been sleepwalking through it, content with the status quo. In that car, I made a vow - whatever the news was to be, I would not just survive, but I would thrive and become my best version. I knew I had to open my heart again to the idea of love, and it would be love that would help me fight my battle ahead, whatever it was to be.

We arrived at the hospital and were directed to the oncology lab. The fear of the unknown gnawed at me as I waited for the results. Watching other families arrive for treatment and seeing the younger children moved me. Hearing their cries as nurses began to poke and prod made my heart ache. Finally, the medical team moved us to a private room. The verdict arrived: an optic nerve glioma, which is a type of pediatric cancer that is nestled in my right eye and threatens not only my vision but my life.

An unexpected sense of relief followed the initial shock of the diagnosis. The uncertainty had vanished, replaced by a clear path forward - a fight for survival. Cancer terminology would become part of the daily vocabulary, followed by many other new things to learn.

However, the path to self-improvement was far from smooth. My predisposition towards nihilism often made it difficult to maintain a positive outlook. The emotional toll of cancer, coupled with the debilitating effects of chemotherapy, made it a constant struggle to achieve my goals. Fortunately, I started seeing a psychologist whose guidance helped me navigate the emotional turmoil and develop strategies to combat my nihilistic tendencies.

Despite the physical and mental challenges, I remained committed to my academic pursuits. Having always been a straight-A student, the fear of jeopardizing my academic record was a significant concern. The frequent absences due to chemotherapy threatened to derail my progress. I worked with my counselor and school administration to develop a 504 plan to ensure I stayed afloat. This plan provided me with the flexibility I needed to cope with the demands of treatment while still maintaining my academic standing.

However, the 504 plan was just a life vest. To truly excel, I needed to exert immense personal effort. Shortened school weeks meant I had to make up for lost time. I started arriving an hour early to work with teachers one-on-one, utilizing my free periods, lunch breaks, and even after-school hours to ensure I mastered the material I had missed. It was a relentless pursuit, but my determination and hard work paid off. I maintained my straight-A record throughout my sophomore and junior years and entered my senior year with a 4.3 GPA while ranking 4th in my class.

While my cancer journey has been arduous, I count myself fortunate. My cancer hasn't defined me; it has instead strengthened me. It has instilled a deep empathy for others facing hardship and a burning desire to use my experiences to make a difference. This desire was realized through my Make-A-Wish experience. My wish to visit the United Nations headquarters in New York City allowed me to learn about diplomacy firsthand, even speaking with senior staff about their experiences and career advice.

Back home, I couldn't just sit around. I became a Make-A-Wish Ambassador, raising over \$500k through storytelling, events, and advocacy. Sharing my vulnerability empowered others facing similar battles. Witnessing the underfunding of childhood cancer research has fueled my next mission. Through the Golden Circle of Champions, I joined the fight for more resources, knowing cancer steals too many young lives. Most recently, Day One, a leading biopharmaceutical company, has invited me to participate in a webinar series called "Empowering your voice:

Advocating while living with Low-Grade Gliomas." This online educational tool will empower families to navigate the complex maze of brain tumor treatment, just like mine.

Today, my tumor is growing again, and so I know my journey is far from over, and yet I stand tall, not just as a cancer survivor but as a testament to the human spirit's resilience. My cancer journey has taught me the meaning of what is true strength. I know now that it is not in the absence of fear but in the courage to persevere where one shows one real strength. It has equipped me with the tools to face any challenge that life throws my way. As I look towards the future, I carry my experiences as a badge of honor, a reminder of my unwavering strength and the power of the human spirit. I am more than determined to continue making a difference in the lives of others, especially those facing cancer, and to leave a positive mark on the world, one step at a time.



From Denial to Acceptance by Marcus O.

Loved one's diagnosis

No one tells you about the silence. After the firefighters—who were called to lift her into her hospice bed but ended up comforting her through her final moments—left, there was silence. After the police officer—called to verify her death—left, there was silence. After the hospice nurse—who was only with us for one day—left, there was silence. The house was completely silent. No one tells you about the silence.

Stage 1: Silence

I think that silence is the first stage of grief. It wasn't quite denial yet; it was just silence. The constant trips to the kitchen to fill up water bottles, to the garage for catheters, around the house for this or that—it was all over. The routine that I had become accustomed to over the past eleven months was no more. In a sense, I also felt relief. For the first time in almost a year, I could stop holding my breath. The battle may have been lost, but at least it was over. I let out a deep sigh, and after that—all that was left was silence.

Stage 2: Denial

My first dose of denial came mere minutes after her death. My mom's best friend called me with her periodic check-in. "How are you doing," she asked. "Not great," I replied. I heard a shaky breath before a faint "no" was heard through the phone. I guess even she had silence before denial. A "yes" to the question I knew she was asking was all I could muster. After that the doses of denial came swiftly. The two men from the funeral home carried her down the stairs and loaded her body into their white van. How could that be the mom I knew? Her voice followed me throughout the house making sure that I wasn't slacking just because she wasn't there. Don't forget to empty the dishes. The house needs vacuuming. Help your father. Her empty bed and eerily quiet room—where we had laughed, cried, and loved. The vacant seat at Thanksgiving dinner three days later. She was gone.

Stage 3: Bargaining

Not long after my mom passed away, I read somewhere that children who lose a parent at a young age are willing to give almost anything up to just spend one more hour with their parent. Until that moment, I hadn't considered it, but in less than a minute, I became certain that I would give up anything for the chance to spend an hour with my mom again. When she was first diagnosed, I told my parents I only wanted to know essential information. I don't know exactly what my reasoning was at the time, but I recognize now it was a defense mechanism to prevent the harsh reality from sinking in. But it failed. It was very real. As I sat and thought about what I'd give up to see her again—in essence, bargaining—the regrets and wishes began to pile up. Time. Memories. Lessons. This was the hardest part for me to overcome. I felt as if I had no one to blame but myself. It wasn't the disease that prevented me from asking her questions or spending more time with her—it was my desire to avoid vulnerability. To lock it all out. Writing these words now, I realize that this is something I'm still grappling with.

There's no deal I can make to see my mom again and there's no time machine to go back and change the decisions I made. But, I can still close my eyes and imagine where and how we'd spend one more hour together.

Stage 4: Anger

It took just six months after my mom passed for the first wave of anger to surface. It began with an innocuous look through her phone. Initially, I was reliving the happy moments captured in her photos—the contagious smiles, the infectious laughter. Soon, however, screenshots of doctor's emails and test results appeared on the screen. This is from JUNE! I thought angrily to myself. How could they have known it was terminal and not told me until October? At first, my anger was aimed at my mom. It wasn't just about her keeping this colossal secret from me, but also the fact that she wasn't here to provide an explanation. Then it became directed at my dad. How could he have thought it was a good idea to not tell me? What else was he hiding? Then the anger turned to me. Why were you so absent? Why didn't you ask more questions? What else didn't I know? It seemed as if the whole world was against me. Like it wanted me to suffer, to feel pain. In those moments when I needed those around me the most, I couldn't have felt more alone.

Stage 5: Depression

Quite like the ocean she loved, my sadness comes in waves. It's never been crippling like a hurricane. But more like a windy day at the beach, the waves continuously crashing in the background. Some days the waves are bigger than others, but they're always there. Now, almost three and a half years after her passing, my sadness isn't about the past, but the future. The fact my mom won't be at my high school graduation in three months. She won't be at my wedding. She'll never meet my children. The milestone events I always imagined her attending have an empty seat.

Stage 6: Acceptance

It's such a loaded word. Acceptance. And to be honest, it's the one I've had the hardest time figuring out. Denial, bargaining, and anger came naturally—and sadness has always been an undertone to the other stages. But acceptance, damn, that one got me. I didn't know how I could begin to "accept" that my mom was dead. Even typing it out feels so wrong. However, as time has passed, my perception of what "acceptance" means has changed. Early on it felt as though I had to "get over it and move on" so to speak. But now, I have realized that my version of acceptance is fully embracing it. Yes, I had a terrible thing happen, something I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy. And yet, it has been a journey that I have learned from, persevered through, and come out better because of. Of course, I wish my mom was still here. But for me, the crux of my acceptance journey was coming to terms with the realization that—for better or worse—we all have to live with the choices we make. Nobody is perfect. But at the end of the day, we all have to move forward. For me, that means living without my mom. However, it doesn't mean leaving her behind. Every day I take the values she instilled in me and the things she stood for and I move forward. Thus, I am able to forge my own path, not without her, but with her memory and love by my side. That is my version of acceptance.



From Diagnosis to Survivorship: Healing with Humor and Music by Jaiden M.

Personal Diagnosis

In 2017, my life changed forever: I was diagnosed with metastatic brain cancer—not exactly what I had in mind for the future. The tumor removal surgery left me extremely uncoordinated and with double vision that made my head hurt. This meant no more competitive basketball, no more martial arts, and a prolonged break from the violin. During chemotherapy, nausea and vomiting became daily rituals. My appetite went on vacation, and I was always tired. Don't even get me started on the ever-dreaded hair loss. I went from Bieber to Pitbull in record time. Beating cancer was definitely no easy feat, but I gained physical and mental strength from the support of my family and community and the healing powers of music and humor. The countless silver linings of that time shaped who I am today.

After the initial surgery, I was re-hospitalized for a CSF leak that forced me to lay face down for five consecutive days due to excruciating headaches. I remember being able to do very little, but I knew I could always count on music. Made especially for me, “Jaiden’s Power Healing Playlist” was always on speaker. Loaded with my favorite songs, it became my soundtrack, comforting me through six weeks of radiation therapy.

In between radiation and chemotherapy, my family and I went to Vegas—of all places. Typically, whatever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, but I’m willing to break that rule to win this scholarship. Let me tell you, strolling in a wheelchair down the streets of Las Vegas makes an 11-year-old a little wide-eyed. We saw some of my favorite comedians perform live. Terry Fator, a comedian/ventriloquist, made me throw up from laughing too hard—or was that the radiation? But he made it up to me by inviting our family backstage for a meet ‘n greet. I smiled the whole way through the unforgettable experience.

Seven months of chemo came next, and I spent a lot of time in the hospital because of painful G-tube cellulitis and low blood counts. I was miserable, and positivity quickly became a necessity. My dad helped me devise a brilliant plan to keep me laughing: a joke exchange. I asked for a joke from every person who entered my room, and in return, they received one of my finest. Some of

my happiest moments in the hospital were making the nurses laugh out loud at my borderline inappropriate jokes. Yo Mama jokes became my secret weapon against the cancer monster.

Once chemo ended, I cashed in my Make-A-Wish. Growing up, my dad played lots of different genres of music, but country was his number one. He passed that love on to me as he explained the lyrics of some of his favorites. So, the foundation flew my family and me to the Stagecoach Festival in California where they had arranged for us to personally meet the best-selling solo album mega-superstar, Garth Brooks! There I was, chatting it up with Garth and his lovely wife, Trisha Yearwood. He was so down-to-earth and seemed to really care about what I had to say. When he performed that night, we belted out tunes like tomorrow would never come. (If you got that reference, you've got great taste in music!) It was truly a night to remember.

I recently entered Survivorship. It's my first year without bloodwork, lumbar punctures, MRIs, and doctor's appointments. And while I don't really think about cancer every day anymore, my treatments left me with a few souvenirs like life-long side effects and a vertically challenged stature. I'm parked at a modest 5'2", meaning I have to shop for clothes in the kids' section and need a booster seat to see over the dash. I'm about the height of Lady Liberty's nose, and I'm sensing that the chicks don't dig it. But I embrace this with open arms. I continue to make the best of the hand I was dealt, and I aim to spark joy wherever I go. I might be pocket-sized, but I've got a sense of humor that towers above.

To this day, music remains my companion, accompanying me everywhere I go (yes, even in the shower). My journey with cancer was undoubtedly a challenging one, but it's not something I dwell on. Life often throws us curveballs, and what truly matters is how we still manage to hit them out of the park. My experience has deepened my appreciation for life, and I'm committed to filling each day with the restorative power of music and the joy of laughter.



I will Catch It by Griffin G.

Loved one's diagnosis

There is no beauty in death. Poets can cover it with metaphors and rhymes, but death is death. There are no moments of rejoicing, no full circle realization, just a looming sense of collapse. Death is a messy business. It leaves your house smelling like chemicals, and leaves marks on your walls, and shower chairs in your bathrooms. Death keeps gatorade in the fridge, and keeps doors closed. Death keeps humidifiers running, and folk music playing, and spoons clinking against bowls and teeth in tandem. There is no sympathy in the trudging walk of death, especially once it begins to pick up pace.

My father lived for two years after his diagnosis. It grabbed him all at once at our dinner table, surrounded by friends, eating lasagna out of bright green bowls. It was a half day, on a crisp november wednesday. I was excited. I wasn't ready for the ambulance, wasn't briefed for the smell of bleach and the sound of clogs. One moment he was laughing, on the floor the next. I remember the waiting room, the doctor's worry about a growth, a surgery date. They used state of the art equipment, the best they had. The stroke he suffered had taken away his motor and speaking abilities. I taught him how to move his arms again. I taught him how to say my name. In a cramped hospital room, he became my father again.

Two years can be a long time for a cancer patient. There is an uncertainty in a diagnosis, a gray area that science can't control. Progress fluctuates between periods of growth and decay. My father had made his way back home when the pandemic hit, trapping us in a house with the disease, confining us near permanently. Each day was spent cramped inside our house, barely big enough for us all. Chemo appointments and research trials took up the time we had available. He was making progress, more than many doctors expected him to make. But my father was a fighter, and he rarely gave up on anything. But cancer is a disease, and it takes. The first thing it took was his memory. I'd find myself angry, tired of repeating the same thing over and over again. He'd forget important people, places we'd been, the names of our dogs. It took his motor function next. I began to help him eat, guiding the spoon to his mouth when his strength was unable to support it. My father was a fighter, and he was tired of everyone helping him. He wanted to be independent. He wanted to help himself. He'd be angry every time I helped him eat, or when mom

tied his shoes. Cancer doesn't care how proud you are. It is a disease blind to all conditions, strength, intelligence, freedom. You become cancer, and it takes all else from you.

My father would survive until 2021, dying at home surrounded by friends and family. The last I saw of him was taken away from me by men with gloves, placed inside a black bag. The hospital bed layed empty, the room felt wrong without his steady breathing. Two days later, the ceremony. The legacy my father left behind was remembered in the building he poured decades of his life into. Friends, family, coworkers, strangers, all gathered to celebrate the life he lived. Because cancer takes everything from you, but it brings people together in the process. Cancer took my father away, but brought back a lifetime of memories.

I don't think grief can be quantified in times you've cried, or how long it's been since you've gotten out of bed and showered. Grief comes in waves, starting from the moment the issue makes itself apparent, until it strikes. I had two years to prepare myself for his final night, and it did nothing. Grief grabs you by the ankles and throws you deep into a pit of memories, expecting you to crawl your way out. It will leave you for weeks or months at a time and sneak up behind you just to throw you in again. Grief reminds you of faces you've forgotten, of boxes unopened in the basement, dressers covered in dust. Grief reminds you of the music you refused to listen to, the bowls you threw away, the hazy spot in your mind where he's supposed to be. Nobody understands until they've dealt with it as well, unsure of what to say except for "I'm sorry," or "I can never understand your pain" because they never know. Death, cancer, and grief, are stigmatized to an extent beyond understanding. Processing it is a one way road, covered in sharp gravel you're made to walk barefoot on a hot summer day. It takes years, decades, even, to come to terms with your experiences, let alone others. But stigma can only reach so far, and people learn to forget, and never bat an eye to the thought of a dead pet, or a dead relative. Jokes will get tossed up, and met with a deep silence that ends when you say it's okay, and that it doesn't bother you. People will tiptoe around you like they're afraid to bump into you, like you're made of glass. You become lifes crash test dummy. No matter how easy it seems to deal with, nothing prepares you for the waves of guilt, milestones missed, days they would've loved. Grief manifests in every corner of your existence, every trip you take, every drive echoed by folk music and dying trees. Grief hunts you down until you're ready to meet it. It will run at you relentlessly until you turn to catch it. Grief is nothing but a fear of acceptance muddled with memories, memories that you can't let go.

I'm not sure if I've fully grieved the loss of my father. I've found myself eating food he used to cook for me, buying myself the chocolate milk we used to share. The time we shared in nature has become personal for me, and I recreate it alone, listening to music we loved. But I haven't let my grief catch up quite yet. My father was nothing but healthy, and cancer should've been the least of his worries. Maybe he knew what was happening all along, prepared for what was to come, prepared to die. After all, my father was a man of planning, and a man of thought, and I try to be more like him. I keep the house neat when my mother feels sick, I cook our dinners, I split the logs and start the kindling fires. My mom sees him in my face, sees his scrawl in my notes and homeworks, hears him in the music I play on long car rides. And maybe one day soon I'll let myself see him too. I still get hungry for his food, still call his phone to hear his voicemail, still wear his clothes to sleep, because I'll always miss him, and he'll always be my father. And when the time comes, I think I'll be ready for grief to come running. I think I'll be ready to catch it. My father would catch it, so I will too.



Miracle Child by Audrey D.

Personal Diagnosis

I still remember when I was little, and my days were filled with zero worries about when my next hospital visit was or my health when performing regular, everyday tasks. But after being diagnosed at the age of five and surviving four relapses after that, I can truly say my life has completely changed.

Some people call me a miracle child, others call me a silent hero. As I lay in my hospital bed the same as I have for hundreds of days in the past, I can say I feel that I am neither of those names. I have learned that life is sometimes not always about overcoming obstacles, so much of it is about enduring the hardships.

As I ponder these thoughts while recovering from my treatments, I notice a friendly nurse and doctor enter the room. I struggle to see their faces as my eyes have swelled shut from the treatments but I recognize their voices. It's the pain specialist team. Surprisingly, they ask my parents to leave, so we can talk.

"Audrey, how are you doing today?" The ulcers in my mouth and throat only allow me to produce a slight,

"Mm' hm" through my teeth.

"What would you say your pain level is on a scale of 1-10?" I lie, saying, "four," knowing that if I say five or higher, they will give me more meds that knock me out or make me feel nauseous.

"Audrey, the reason why we wanted to talk to you alone is to ask you if this is too much?" What did they mean? The doctor continues, "You've been doing this a long time, we just wanted to let you know, if it's too much, you can stop." I looked at her puzzled. I had never thought about stopping treatment before. I probably should have felt angry at the suggestion but I wasn't. After all, wasn't she asking if I preferred a slow, comfortable death or a long, painful life full of treatment?

Cancer had taken so much away from me; most of my hearing, the lives of my closest friends, and the years I could have spent being a child. This disease ripped at my family, threatening to tear it apart like a ravenous bear. It had caused me pain and struck the fear of death into me that came after each relapse.

After thinking about it, the “comfortable path” would only lead me to missing out on what I love most. I have caring friends and a loving family. I have dreams of becoming an engineer and helping those around me. I want to graduate and enjoy each day for what it is. I want to give back and be a force for good.

The doctor understandably believed me to be a sick child. She did not realize that I had not asked for this suffering but I had accepted it and formed a way to endure it. I used my time in the hospital to prepare for my future. Each day, when I was able, I would try to keep up with my school work, trying not to fall behind. My peers would have me do research for the upcoming school plays for which I would create documents and boards for them. I continued to prepare and practice my speeches for various foundations to raise money for neuroblastoma research. I fabricated holiday ornaments out of recycled aluminum cans and sold them for charity. I continued taking advanced coding classes while working on different projects. All of this I did from my hospital bed in the hopes that one day I would be clear, or dare I say cured.

For me, no amount of pain, suffering, or distress could keep me from pressing on. Because the little things in life are what make it so sweet and worthwhile.

I turned my head back at the doctor and said,

“It’s okay, I need to keep going.”

“You’re sure, Audrey?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I responded. I have been fighting cancer my whole life and I may never overcome it, but I can endure it and I plan to do so as long as there is life in my body.



My Very Own Bedroom! (...) by Ruby T.

Loved one's diagnosis

The day after leaving the hospital and arriving back home, I walked into my bedroom, which looked the same. All of my sister's and my things were just as we'd left them the week before. Her sheets were still on the bed, a black comforter with bright white and pink flowers and a matching hot pink pillow case. Her clothes stuck out of the dresser drawers, and more unfolded, tossed clothes were scattered on her half of the bedroom floor. Her desk was still neatly organized with pens, notepads, and sticky notes. Everything was the same physically, but there was something missing. Something more than just the bedroom, she was missing. It was the moment when I entered our bedroom that day that I felt the emptiness filling the room, and I realized my sister wasn't coming home.

My sister, Jessica, and I have shared a bedroom our whole lives, or at least up until I was twelve years old. As much as my sister and I loved each other, I can remember countless conversations trying to figure out who was going to move out of the bedroom and sleep somewhere else, so we could each have our own bedrooms.

We argued with each other about one of us being too loud at night, being annoying or embarrassing when one of our friends was over, and being too messy and not tidying up our part of the room. Many times, this was me in the wrong, with her being the older sister, and always being cleaner and more put together.

Jessica would get so frustrated with me when I'd want to talk after the lights were out and she was trying to go to sleep for the night.

"Jessi, do you ever—" I'd begin to whisper.

"Ruby, I do not know. It's 9:45 and I am trying to sleep! Shh!" she'd impatiently reply, cutting me off before I could even ask her anything.

My mom would also get frustrated with our talking at bedtime. "It's bedtime, and you have school tomorrow! Sleep!" my mom would yell from down the hallway.

These types of things went on for several years. We'd talk with each other about one of us moving into the "shoe-room," our family's storage room, which sits all the way downstairs right next to the front door. It was not the ideal bedroom location or size, but it was a room we wouldn't have to share.

Summer came and we were creating our Summer Bucket Lists. In my family, Summer Bucket Lists are not your typical, "Go camping," or "Have a water balloon fight." Ours were more like big jobs that needed to be done, like "Paint the entryway," or "Scrub the kitchen cupboards and drawers." The item that made the list this summer was "Clean out the shoe-room."

We brought the idea up to Mom and Dad. We proposed that we could clean out the shoe-room, and one of us could make it into a bedroom. It seemed so logical to our twelve and eight year old brains. We wouldn't have to share a room with each other - how simple of a solution! Mom and Dad were not fond of the proposal, finding it extremely unrealistic and unnecessary. Needless to say, "Clean out the shoe-room" was not crossed off the list that summer.

Years later, in May of 2018, Jessica was diagnosed with a rare bone cancer with a super long name, one I didn't know how to pronounce or spell. I know it ended in "sarcoma." I also knew deep down this diagnosis was a big deal. It was bad. I was 11 years old, and she was 14.

Over the next year, Jessica battled this cancer at home and at the Children's Hospital in Iowa City. While she was away doing treatments for days at a time, I finally had the "luxury" I had wished so long for - I had my own room! Of course, I wasn't as excited as I thought I would be when I imagined having my own room, considering the circumstances. My sister was home a lot less, and when she was home, she was certainly not in the mood to play pretend or chat at night. I was slowly coming to realize that having my own room was not all it was cracked up to be.

Nearly one year later, at the end of April of 2019, Jessica passed away at the children's hospital. One of the hardest things for me as a little girl who just lost her big sister to cancer was the transition of life without her. This was especially hard considering we shared a bedroom and she was my only sister.

After experiencing somewhat having my own room for the past year, I knew it was silent at night, and felt emptier, but it really came to life when I knew my sister wasn't coming home from the hospital in a couple days.

The day my family got home from our last trip to that hospital, I entered my very own bedroom. Everything of hers was still in the bedroom just the way she'd left it the week before, but now it was mine, and I didn't want it. I realized I didn't want a bedroom without my sister.

There was a heavy silence filling the room, similar to when someone says something rude about someone standing right behind them. It was awkward, like something was missing- and I knew exactly what it was.

I would go to sleep every night without having my sister to say good night to. I would go to sleep every night with her bed across the room, with nobody laying under the covers. I would go to sleep every night without getting yelled at from down the hall to be quiet, because there was nobody for me to be chatting with. And I would go to sleep every night thinking about and remembering the time we had together in our bedroom that I took for granted.

I took for granted the days and days on end we would spend playing "college" together, pretending our bedroom was our dorm room, and we were roommates. We would carry our backpacks around the house, pretending to be on campus walking to our next class.

I took for granted the hours we'd spend playing Barbies with one another. We had a three-story bright pink Barbie mansion my mom had scored at a garage sale. It had everything- a kitchen table with plates, cups, and silverware, several bedrooms, each with dressers and beds with sheets and pillows, a bathroom with a shower curtain and a toilet that really flushed, and even a doorbell that actually rang.

I took for granted laughing and talking with each other in the dark at bedtime, and ignoring my mom yelling at us to go to sleep from down the hall. When there were thunderstorms, we would have sleepovers because I would get scared. I'd climb into her bed because my bed was next to a window.

Eventually, my mom and I slowly began to clean out her part of the bedroom and closet. We started to pack away all of her things into her dresser, and tried to part with the things we didn't need to keep. Then it became real. All that time she was staying at the hospital, at least her stuff was still all there, but now, we were putting it all away. It was real, I had my very own bedroom—and I didn't want it. My whole life I glorified the idea of having my own room, but I now realize all that glitters is not gold.



Peace by Cooper R.

Loved one's diagnosis

Peace. A stress-free state of security and calmness that comes when there's no fighting or war. I promise I'm not crazy, but this was the first emotion I felt after Henley, my 4 ½ old sister, died. I see how this sounds strange as most people would not describe watching death as peaceful. The only way I can explain it is, after war comes peace.

Henley's four and a half years of life were a war against cancer. Of course, I did not know this. This war was my reality. My normal. She was my best friend who filled my heart with love. In the battle for her life, she was my peace.

When I was 2 ½, Henley, who I nicknamed Henney Bee, was born. With my first glance, I knew everything that I needed to know. She was my sister, mine to fiercely love and protect. I was filled with unconditional love. Peace.

For 17 perfect months, I cherished my baby sister. We were ignorantly happy and relishing being a family of four. Then came the vomit. Not "I ate the wrong thing at the Mexican restaurant" vomit. This was "something is not right" vomit. Finally, after extensive scans, my beautiful baby sister was diagnosed with stage 4 Neuroblastoma. On the inside, her precious little body looked like Swiss cheese. Cancer was eating away at my sister; eating away at our world. War began. Operation Cure Henley.

When one person in the family gets cancer, the entire family is at war with it. My parents were met with unthinkable decisions. Me, I was left, a four year old boy, wondering. What is cancer? What does this mean for Henley? For me? For our family? Why is my sister not home? Where are my parents? What is all this beeping? Who will take and pick me up from school? Who is tucking me into bed tonight?

I learned quickly my job was to be a soldier. Soldier on, protect my sister, love my family, and quietly carry the burdens of this nasty disease. Making sure I behaved and caused no extra stress for my family. Accepting my role did not come without fear. Starting this journey, I was terrified.

Picture my carefree life as a four year old. Days were filled with playgrounds and swing sets, sand boxes and Legos, giggles and fun. In one day, that was all gone. Cancer. Treatment. Scans. Hospitals. Goodbyes. These were the words that now filled my days. I felt alone. Where were my mom and dad? Whose tears was I hearing tonight? Where will I be sleeping tonight? Will I get to be home to play with my toys and dog?

Three years of continuous treatment took us from downtown Indianapolis to New York and finally to Grand Rapids. I learned quickly my fear would be lessened by those surrounding us in our war. The nurses, doctors, and staff were not only there to treat Henley; they filled our days with love, comfort, laughs, and smiles. From escaping to play rooms, competing on PS2, sneaking away to quiet rooms for naps, the staff always found a way to make me feel special. Hearing the squeaks fill the hallway during wheelchair drag races filled me with joy on our neverending treatment days. A nurse even taught me how to armpit fart in an elevator as my sister was being wheeled away to surgery! Nurses always found ways to bring smiles. I honestly can say, those were some of the best times in my life. I realized I did not have to battle alone. Surrounded by allies, we were creating lifelong memories. Peace amongst the battle.

Little did we know, the true fight was just ahead. Filled with anxiety, scan day arrived. Always hopeful, we prayed for Henley to be cancer free. We were painfully disappointed. The cancer had spread.

Devastation. Heartache. Frustration. Fear. Confusion. I had watched my baby sister lose her hair, smelled her vomit, heard her painful cries, watched her suffer. Now what? I thought the treatment was supposed to make the cancer go away. Why did it not work? We returned home broken, defeated, lost, and confused. For a couple of days it felt like our family sat in silence. In our weakness, the strength of our community brought us up from our knees. One Sunday, we were surprised with a caroling group of family, friends, and strangers that prayed over us, sang worship, and just loved us. Once again, surrounded by allies and with renewed hope, we battled on; this time to Sloan Kettering in New York City.

Armed with faith, determination, and hope, my family decided to treat this next phase as an adventure. Instead of focusing on the treatments, surgeries, and scans, we embraced every opportunity. I look back now and realize these memories are some of the best. The Ronald McDonald House offered a soundproof music room for all my drum solos. Throughout New York

City, we explored Central Park, spent hours deciding on the perfect Lego selection at the Lego Store, and devoured greasy, piping hot pizza slices. My favorite part of all the adventures was that my sister was by my side. I was able to share all of this with her - the giggles, the surprises, the love. Peace.

I had learned to soak up the highs, because the lows seemed to always return. Without warning, our world turned upside down. Once again, following the dreaded news of scans, life fell apart. Operation Cure Henley's next stop was Grand Rapids, Michigan.

On the sandy beaches, I found peace in the storm. It was here I saw Henley come to life, splashing in the waves, sculpting sandcastles, and giggling at my antics. It was here that Henley and I enjoyed the best ice cream in the world. It was here Henley found her beloved "hot pool," really just a hot tub. It is here that I still feel closest to my sister.

Then the bombshell. I was now 6 years old; this was my world. My new normal. That four year old that spent his days in sandboxes and swing sets was long gone. I knew nothing but the destruction of cancer and the world it created. Then came the crying. Blubbering tears seeped from my mom and dad. Words filled the air like a foreign language - incurable, hospice, the end. It was time to begin our goodbye.

In hopes of soaking up every memory possible, my parents bought Henley a "hot pool" of her own. The same day that her hospital bed arrived, Henley's dream "hot pool" was delivered. To share in the magic, we gathered with family and friends to celebrate. Little did I know, it would be the last time I saw my sister awake.

As the sunlight crept through my window, I was awakened with screams. Gut wrenching screams. Hesitantly, I crept into my sister's room. A subtle choking noise resonated above the screams and cries. Where was it coming from? With horror, I realized it was coming from my beautiful, baby sister. There she was, lying helplessly, choking, unable to talk. Her bright blue eyes stared deep into me, and I felt nothing. My hands wrapped in hers, I stood, protecting and loving her the only way I knew how. My only job for so long - being her soldier. Then I realized it. Those eyes staring at me no longer sparkled. Her hands had turned cold, colder than anything I've ever touched. She was gone, and I felt calm. I watched as my Dad carried her lifeless body down the stairs and placed her carefully into the back of the black suburban that would take her body from our home.

As he gently laid her down, he took the blanket she was snuggled in as a final reminder of Henley. She was gone; our battle was over; the war was won. Henley had beaten cancer and joined her Creator. Peace.

The days, months, and years that followed brought a new war. In this one, we were missing our captain. Who was I without my sister? My friend? Whose soldier would I be now? What I learned is even though Henley left us here on Earth, she continues to guide, inspire, and lead me every day. I am still her soldier. I am her older brother, her protector, her fiercest friend. She will always be my angel bringing me peace as she watches over me. Peace. Always peace.



Pink by Jessica G.

Loved one's diagnosis

To me, the color of courage is pink. Not the cotton candy pink that stains your lips nor the whimsical pink unicorn that dances through your dreams. Rather it is the stomach-turning, mind-tripping, heart-ripping pink that is embodied in a ribbon.

I will never forget the day that we received the news that my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. The tears that poured down my face from anger, the sick feeling in my gut from fear, to the numb feeling in my mind from disbelief. It was March of 2020; and while all of my peers were coming to grips with a pandemic that had brought our lives to a stand still, I was coming to grips with my mother's breast cancer. Our lives were in a very different stand still. Because all the hospitals were prioritizing COVID, it took nearly 2 months for imaging to become available to confirm my mother's stage 2 breast cancer.

During the Spring of 2020 we lost in-person classroom instruction, sporting events, church, and everything that makes a teenager's life "normal." However, we gained more time with our family, and for us, that was essential. After many rounds of imaging, genetic testing, and doctors' appointments, they had a plan in place—my mom would be scheduled for a left lumpectomy at the end of June. Our family relies on our faith and the power of prayer. We were beyond blessed to learn her surgery was a success.

As summer spilled into fall, we had to embrace another reality. Although the lumpectomy removed the tumor, the genomic analysis showed that her type of cancer was extremely aggressive; she would require months of chemotherapy and radiation. I stood by my mom's side as she underwent chemotherapy, radiation, complications, and additional surgeries to battle her breast cancer. Everyone sees the pink ribbon. I see the constant bone pain, and I remember holding her up when she could no longer stand and steer the grocery cart. Everyone sees the pink ribbon. I see the nausea from drinking just water and the scars from the medport and radiation burns. Everyone sees the pink ribbon. I saw her hair escaping into the wind as we sat outside and I brushed through her long curls for the last time. As I did all of this, I fought back tears as I saw my mom. I saw her baldness. I saw her tears from her frustration and pain. Yet, I saw my mom with her courage, her strength, her determination to fight this cancer so she could be there for her

family. I was determined to provide comfort for my mom by knitting her warm wool hats, massaging her legs that were burning from neuropathy, and cuddling beside her when she was exhausted.

My mom's battle with breast cancer was a turning point in my life. I was angry that this enemy unfairly chose my mom. But watching her demonstrate courage and resiliency changed me. I grew to understand that courage does not complain about situations, grow bitter, or search for sympathy. My mom taught me that true courage is witnessed in your willingness to be vulnerable in moments of weakness yet to still strive for strength during those difficult times.

From that moment on, I began to realize that my life was a highway of opportunities that would allow me to discover my courage. I knew I had to face my fears despite feeling anxious or worried about self image. Thanks to social media, we live in a world of comparisons. As a dancer, dressing daily in a leotard can be challenging for anyone's self-esteem, and dancers are a vulnerable community. However, over the years, I have struggled with my weight, but after watching cancer destroy my mother's physical image, I learned that true beauty lies beneath the surface. Now a senior and respected dancer at my studio, I have found self worth and made it my mission to find the girl in the corner, the one lacking self-confidence that wants to be invisible. I want to be the mentor that empowers them to be invincible, not invisible.

In life we will fight through the unexpected and unfair, but it is courage that leads us to believe that nothing can hold us back. So I think we owe ourselves an apology. We should say we are sorry for letting ourselves stay in places and spaces that we knew we were not respected, wanted, appreciated, valued, nor loved because we longed for a hopeful future. We should know when these hard days come and the trauma is louder than any love being spoken, we should remember that we are more worthy than what has hurt us. When knocked down by mental and physical enemies, we should stand up and stand against these forces with our armor of courage.

My courage was again revealed when I had to advocate for myself when a friendship ultimately resulted in betrayal. After a harassment incident, I courageously fought for a change in policy that would keep myself and others safe going forward. Stepping up and becoming a leader has taught me how courage and confidence are intertwined. I always saw myself as a follower but my roles as a leader throughout various organizations have proven to me that a positive, courageous mindset can bring out the best version of myself and boost my confidence.

We can learn a lot about ourselves when we are faced with life's darkest moments. My mom is my hero and best friend. She still suffers from neuropathy and has been unable to return to work in a full time capacity. However, despite the setbacks, she still has such a positive outlook and continues to serve others. My mom's breast cancer was the catalyst to me finding my courage, and she continues to inspire me every day. Sometimes it would be nice if life was cotton candy, unicorn pink; however, I am grateful for the powerful pink ribbon that changed my life.



Prisoner of 5 East by Isabel R.

Personal Diagnosis

On May 14, 2022, I became prisoner of 5 East, limited by the confines of its pale yellow walls for months on end. Before I knew it, a central line emerging from my chest tethered me to an IV pole. A simple fever rapidly became an intense medical emergency, piling machinery onto the infusion pump and guaranteeing my transition into a human pin cushion. Thrust into a routine of chemotherapy, blood transfusions, spinal taps, and bone marrow aspirations, my idea of "normal" was redefined. Leukemia was a diagnosis I never saw coming, wreaking havoc on my life as I knew it and creating an air of uncertainty around my future.

Previously, dinner as a family was non-negotiable in my household. Gathering around the table each night, we committed to taking a break from our hectic schedules and daunting deadlines to enjoy each other's company. Now, I ate dinner from a tray table pulled across my elevated hospital bed, if it wasn't infusing through my broviac. Quality family time became limited to the exchange period of my parents alternating "shifts" of spending the night with me. Everything about my new normal was unnatural.

Although my illness dictated almost every aspect of my life, I felt empowered to take back the little control I had left. I refused to allow the chemotherapy to take my hair from me, opting to cut it myself. I found fun in the hurt by experimenting with bangs, a bob, and a mohawk before buzzing it completely. When the unknowns were unsettling, my intrigue in medicine fueled me to learn about my illness. I listened intently to the doctor's debriefings in the mornings and scrutinized the clinical trial I was enrolled in, familiarizing myself with the ins and outs of my treatment plan. My quest for knowledge allowed me to advocate for myself as a patient. The IV tranexamic acid makes me nauseous, I would say, requesting the Amicar pills which had worked better for me. When my counts were high enough to go home for a week, I converted my kitchen counter into a sterile field, meticulously flicked the bubbles out of the saline and heparin syringes, and flushed my own lines. Between my bouts of nausea, I performed polynomial long division and evaluated trigonometric identities, determined to continue my education. More than anything, I never felt bad for myself. I consistently sported my "I Got This" t-shirt, refusing to let my struggles kill my spirit. Cancer may be a sly thief, but I never let it steal my smile. Rather than wallowing in self-pity, I learned to focus on my reaction to the events that were out of my control.

My connection to this realm of medicine ignited a passion to pursue a career as a pediatric oncologist. As I studied anatomy, neutrophils were not only "very phagocytic granulocytes," but the cells I so desperately hoped would rise to afford me a week break between my rounds of therapy. I pursued a mentorship through which I shadowed a local hematologist and gained a profound understanding of the role of the provider of care. Being on the other side of experiences that I lived as a patient, such as diagnoses and lumbar punctures, solidified my interest in the field. Volunteering at events such as Light the Night offered a unique opportunity to give back to the community that had done so much for me. The very disease that had initially cast dark shadows over my future now illuminates a clear path by which I can support patients at their most vulnerable moments through both scientific endeavors and personal relationships. I may have managed to escape 5 East, but I will forever carry my experiences on the oncology floor with me. Rather than let my experiences define me, I allow them to influence my perspective, ground me in gratitude, and motivate me to achieve my goals.



That Joy Thing by Andrew P.

Personal Diagnosis

My parents planned my funeral. My mom showed it to me once, all typed up in a Word document. The verses, the songs, the flowers, even the funeral home. One of the poems my mom picked talks about “that joy thing you splash everywhere.” Even with the possibility of death, my parents looked for joy. And they taught me that. It’s the foundation of our family and one of my strongest values.

It’s weird when the thing that impacts you the most in life isn’t something you remember. At 17 months old, I was diagnosed with a rare brain tumor called Atypical Teratoid Rhabdoid Tumor (ATRT). It was the size of a kiwi, lodged in my cerebellum and twisted around my brain stem. Back in 2007 when I was diagnosed, 90% of kids with ATRT died in the first year and the other 10% usually died in the second year. The doctors told my parents they could just take me home, which I guess is a euphemism for....and let him die.

There wasn’t a standard treatment for ATRT back then because nothing worked. My parents figured that if the cancer had a name, then there must be doctors who were researching it and trying to cure it. They contacted pediatric neuro-oncologists around the country, asking for their opinions. They read research articles, requested abstracts from conferences, and hunted for unpublished clinical studies. From all of that information, they concocted a treatment plan with pieces of existing protocols and presented it to my oncologist, who graciously agreed to try it. 58 weeks of chemotherapy, repeat spinal and Ommaya injections, 30 sessions of proton radiation, 2 years of maintenance oral chemotherapy, and I was the first ATRT survivor at the University of Michigan Mott Hospital.

I don’t remember much about having cancer, so I’ve had to rely on the memories that my parents share with me. Sometimes it is stories of wild medical stuff gone wrong like chemo spraying out of my port, or lung infections and vomiting. Other times, it is tales of my midnight snacking on a tub of butter (every calorie is a good calorie!) or pushing my plastic lawnmower through the halls of the hospital “mowing” the floor. With each story and every memory, there is always this raw sense of hope and resilience that comes through. I have marinated in that hope and resilience my

whole life, and believe that it has shaped me and my core beliefs in compassion, kindness, and inclusion.

Surviving cancer is part of the fabric of my life. I don't know a world before I had cancer, so throughout my life, survivorship is just me, a core part of my identity. In practical terms, survivorship means a lot of follow-up visits with specialty doctors and annual scans and tests. It means a bald spot from radiation, tiny adult teeth, and not being able to run very fast. It means random aches and pains, being a slow reader, needing extra time on tests, and feeling tired a lot of the time. It also means hope. And that there is a greater purpose to my life, and a responsibility to be a good person. It means that I am capable of doing hard things, that persistence and resilience are built into my DNA. Survivorship has given me a tenacity and work ethic that I might not have had otherwise. Sometimes I have to work harder and longer at things than others do, but I don't give up. Ever.

Having cancer and experiencing my own limitations has greatly influenced my character, and the amount of compassion and grace I give others. I know what it is like to look different, walk different, and learn different. My side effects from treatment are mild in comparison to many survivors, but these differences are very noticeable to other kids, who were not always kind. My parents tried to instill a tough attitude in me to dish out to kids who might tease me – “No, I can't run. I had cancer. What's your excuse?” I was never brazen enough to deliver that kind of vibe on my own behalf, and instead became an observer and defender of others.

Since preschool, teachers have often paired me with struggling students - not because I was super chatty or smart - but because I was kind. As I've gotten older, I have become more vocal when I see someone being treated differently or judged. One of the great equalizers for me has been music. I was first exposed to live music when I was in the hospital for chemo infusions. There was a music therapist who came around to the patient's rooms with his guitar and would play for kids. I was mesmerized by him. No matter what else was going on, my mom would stop everything for him because I loved to listen to him play. I started guitar lessons in 3rd grade but struggled with the strings and finger placement because of my tremor and fine motor delays. So, in 4th grade, I asked my parents for a drum set and lessons, and somewhat unbelievably, they said yes! I have played drums nearly every day since then.

Music is amazing - no matter what limitation or challenge, we can all play music and share it with others. Music brings out a sense of community and connection for people; it joins us, no matter our differences or abilities. As a volunteer at a music school and in my local middle school, I often work 1:1 with younger students who struggle with the technical skills of their instrument or who face sensory overload but still want to play music. Sitting with them in those moments, and knowing that I can help them navigate those feelings and still find the joy of music is a tremendous experience.

Music is who I am. Marching band, pep band, wind ensemble, jazz band, and even playing drums in a cover band performing at bars, festivals, and theaters. I love live music. Getting to a show early, setting up the equipment, tweaking the microphones, and adjusting the sound for the acoustics of the room, the vibe of the audience, and the energy of the band. That feeling when the sound check is done, the band starts their set, and you can feel the kick drum in your body. I want that feeling to be part of my life forever. It's when I feel the most alive.

My career goal is to become an Audio Engineer and work in a recording studio with musicians or to run live sound at concerts and performances. There is some irony in my interest in working with audio and sound because I have bilateral high frequency hearing loss from chemo and radiation. This hasn't stopped or hindered me. Actually, I think it's made me work harder and strive to learn and absorb as much as I can. I am so excited about the opportunity to learn and create in college, and to have a career making and producing great music.

I know I am one of the lucky ones. I survived a usually terminal cancer. But surviving cancer doesn't mean the battle is over. I have a genetic mutation that predisposes me to cancer - germline deletion of SMARCB1/INI1 in chromosome band 22q11.2. It's a fancy name that means there's a reasonable chance that I will have cancer again. This hangs over my head. Not just getting cancer again, but what it would do to my family, emotionally and financially.

I wonder what my life would have been like if I hadn't had cancer. Who would I be? Would I be able to run faster? Would I hear music differently? Would I have the same never give up work ethic? Would I have as much joy and appreciation for the little things? My experiences with cancer left me with a deep compassion and understanding for what it's like to live with differences, and a fierce sense of responsibility to helping others feel included and valued. I know I could relapse; but for now, I live. I want to go to college, meet new friends, learn new things, and

make awesome music. I want to make my parents proud, to be a model for my younger brothers, and to keep splashing that joy thing around.



The Sound of Grief by Fiona C.

Loved one's diagnosis

The dripping sound of the IV and sobbing echoed down the empty hospital halls. It was early morning before the patients' visiting hours began. I was scared—scared to enter the ICU room I had been fine going in and out of for the past month. I faintly remember the long dash down the hallways, coat in hand and remaining unconsciously deaf to my surroundings. I had prepared for this day for a year, but with some things in life, no matter how much preparations were made, it will never be enough. Out of breath, I tried to work up my courage to open the sliding door even though the weight of my hand was too heavy for me to raise. Choking through my reluctant sobs, I hesitantly pushed open the gateway that seemingly separated me from the end of my entire world.

On that fateful day two years ago when my father passed away, I heard for the first time the hollowing sounds of grief. I will never forget the guttural cries of my grandparents, the pleas of my mother to not leave her behind, and the deafening silence of my 7-year-old brother who had no idea what was going on. Nevertheless, to me, the most prominent sounds were my own voice. It was a heart-wrenching and unfamiliar sound. I do not recall much of what happened after we left the hospital that day, nor the weeks after. Although, I do vividly remember the car ride home; behind the numerous red traffic lights that my mother drove past in disbelief, the scenery felt serene and somewhat lonely.

My father was diagnosed with terminal cancer three years ago. There were no warning signs; on the contrary, he was the healthiest, most active, and most optimistic person I know and will ever know. After a long struggle, to our dismay, his cancer came back with a vengeance; he was hospitalized and completely immobilized waiting for his organs to fail one at a time. As he was the greatest supporter of my education, I sensed I lost something more than a parental figure. A fragment of the future I used to envision was now clouded by a mist of death. It's a gradual process to accept the fact that for the remainder of my life, I will never know the stories and wisdom of his past he has yet to tell, and simultaneously he will never see the life I have yet to live. That is all to say that regret was an emotion I felt the deepest throughout my healing process.

My family are immigrants. Throughout the experience, they had little to no means of communication using the English language, so I often acted as their translator with every chemotherapy session, pharmacist call, and hospital visit. For a while, I took on an overwhelming routine of going from school and immediately to the hospital, arriving home near midnight to do homework until early morning. I was physically drained. Moreover, watching a loved one painfully deteriorate was emotionally and mentally frustrating since I lacked expertise. Seeing my family remain resilient, I was oddly inspired instead of wallowing in self-pity to search for stability, healing, and knowledge persistently.

On many occasions, I remind myself that life moves forward no matter what. Hence, to counter my lack of healing and balance, I diverted my focus from things out of my control— my father’s vengeful cancer— shifting my energy to my role in the family. Using my artistic skills, I would draw commissions online to help my mom with living expenses. Other times, I took over scheduling fun weekend plans for my younger brother and grandparents. The added responsibilities taught me to stay positive during difficult times and ways to seek support when dealing with my grief. Essentially, I turned my sorrows into action and the portrayal of gratefulness for the people and things currently with me. For me to stand strong served as a pillar for my mother, grandparents, and younger brother, which in itself was a fundamental journey I discovered through personally seeing death and understanding the difference between life and living.

Although the sounds of grief I have heard are chords I will never forget, I have recently found solace in the chimes of life. As a first-generation college student, I am determined to pursue higher education— a medical career in oncology— and dedicate my life’s design to the preservation of other people and their loved ones. With death, scars resonate and may hurt but the wounds will eventually heal as a mark of strength and perseverance.



The Unimaginable by Grace A.

Loved one's diagnosis

Every door that lined that sterile hall glowed in bright artificial light. Five. Voices from each room joined the countdown in unison and even the frailest sat up in their beds to squint at the televisions mounted before them. Four. Some people were cheering quietly out of respect to those asleep. Three. A mother wiped her eyes, assuring her children that it was only a pesky yawn that sent tears streaming down her face. She was just tired. Two. Doctors and nurses stood in doorways, greeting families they spent more time with than their own. One. Everyone at Morristown Children's Hospital erupted in celebration.

Happy New Year.

Happy. The word didn't exactly match the surroundings.

Of course, it was a strange word to use in the pediatric oncology unit.

I was only six years old when my family found out what was wrong with my little brother. I didn't understand what cancer was, how Matthew got it, or why his hair was falling out. I was even more confused about why the adults around me were afraid to say that word. People told me Matthew was "sick" and were "sorry for what my family was going through," but no one could tell me what exactly was happening to him—or when he was going to get better.

One year, when I was around ten, we celebrated New Year's Eve at the hospital. Luckily, this was one of the only holidays he ever spent inpatient. Looking back, that night stands as the first time I began to process what was happening in my life. Entering the new year in the same bad situation as the last made me realize that adults weren't telling me when Matt was going to get better because, like me, they didn't know. Things weren't going to improve with the push of a button, or the drop of a ball. That year, everyone in my family had the same resolution.

For the past ten years, I've struggled with the idea of the unknown. When scans come back clear, there is always a possibility that the cancer will come back. When Matt is in active treatment, in the back of my mind lives the fear that he may not get better this time. However, recently, I have

come to terms with the fact that despite this lingering uncertainty, my family and I can still enjoy life without the weight of the dreaded “c word” over our heads. A person isn’t defined by a diagnosis. I learned this through my brother’s stay at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia in the spring of 2023.

What began as a five-week outpatient trial grew into one of the most intense inpatient treatments Matt has ever undergone. Extreme side effects took his ability to speak or move, and he fell into an induced coma. In those weeks, I felt like I was six years old again. Hushed phone conversations and looks of pity took me back to that New Year’s Eve night of more than a decade ago. Only this time, I knew the meaning of the word cancer. I knew what happens if someone doesn’t get better. Despite this, being older, I also knew the value of faith. I knew the only thing I could do was have faith that Matt would get better, and, eventually, he began to.

Every day, I watch Matt get stronger. I watch the strength in his hands and fingers return. Through this slow process, I’ve come to embrace the child-like innocence that used to haunt me. Some answers will remain simply unknown. The only thing we can do is take things day by day and allow happiness into our lives even in the darkest hours. This way, we take the power out of the unknown. Now, cancer is only a word

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When I first started this essay in June 2023, intending to submit it to collages, I thought that’s where the story would end. Matt would come home from his treatment, and our family would be reunited again. On July 9th, 2023, the unthinkable happened.

I still believe everything I wrote in that essay.

Some things you simply just can’t control. You wake up one day, and your brother is gone. A life is lost, and from the age of 17 onward, my life would be forever changed.

Everyone wants a happy ending. Growing up, my mom would scramble for the TV remote every time a St. Jude commercial came on. She didn’t want to hear stories of sick children, especially ones that hinted at death.

Sometimes though, horrible things happen. A few times, my mom couldn't find the remote, and she reluctantly sat through the commercial.

At first it's natural for us to dwell on the past. I asked questions, pondered endless what-ifs, and let memories flood my mind. Eventually, I came to accept that although I can't bring Matt back, I still have my whole life ahead of me, and he would want me to live it. I spend time with my friends, take vacations, perform in school shows, and continue to keep good grades. My sister, his twin, reaches milestones in his honor, in a way living the life he never got a chance to. They are turning 16 this May.

Living the unthinkable has undoubtedly shaped who I am today. My time spent on the sidelines as my family fought the ultimate battle taught me lessons that—although it's difficult to say I'm grateful for—I know have made me a stronger and better person. I now know that life is indescribably valuable, and we need to make the most of it. Above all else, do it for the ones watching over you.



The Waves of Grief by Ava T.

Loved one's diagnosis

I've never lived near an ocean. So each time I visit I cherish the waves as they crash over my feet, savoring them from the hot sand. It's times like that, looking out at a seemingly endless expanse that thoughts tend to wander to the deepest corners of the mind. They say God always has a plan and a path laid out for us, yet I don't understand why he took my father from mine. Saying it's unfair would be an understatement, seeing as the waves of negativity still hit me to this day. I was only eleven when my dad was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. I remember the clouds over the park where my mom had told me the news of his diagnosis and tumors. I remember the feeling, the silence.

Complete silence.

Like my world had shifted, and nothing would ever be the same.

It was the same feeling I had months later when I stood in her office with all our loved ones standing in the living room. The silence as she told me he was gone. That he had passed while I was at my friend's house. That he was upstairs, waiting for me to say goodbye. Sometimes the brain may block out our most traumatic moments, but mine was burned it into my memory.

I can remember every single detail of that day, the dark blue jean short I wore. The color of the deepest depth of the ocean. The yellow and white striped shirt I stained with tears and screams. The color of the sun on the sand. The pale hue of his lifeless face. The calm expression. I remember the anger, the fear, and the head-pounding ache in my brain. I remember the call to my best friend as I huddled in my closet, she could barely make out my words. I remember my cousin coming in to comfort me, and both of us breaking down. I remember us playing outside in the backyard as they took his body away, trying to act as if it weren't happening. I remember how my little brother didn't believe my mom when he told him and my sister. I remember how he roamed the house looking for our dad, as if it was just a cruel game of hide and seek.

I remember crawling into bed with my younger sister and sobbing mother, as we cried ourselves into exhausted sleep. After that the next year is a blur. Nothing but muddied water in my mind.

We moved into a new house, my mom got a new boyfriend, and the world seemed upside down. For the longest time I was so angry with her. How could she say my dad was her true love, her soulmate, and date a new man not even five months later? How could she be with him, yet still cry over my dad almost every night?

It didn't make sense to me, and the pre-teen hormones didn't help anything. But still the world kept turning. I dealt with the grief as best I could. Learned how to stop stuffing my emotions and set them free. Tried to make my dad proud. Fell down, got up again. The waves kept crashing, but I never let them break me.

I learned how to tell others why my dad wasn't around. I learned the right time and place to explain things without making it awkward. Some always took it better, with more grace, than others. I remember a distinct time just last summer when the anniversary of his death was coming up and my friend asked if I was okay. I explained to her why my mood was more solemn, and her response was, "Damn, that sucks." With nothing but awkward silence after.

When telling people you lost a parent to cancer, you receive a lot of apologies. For what, I'm not sure. Not like it's either of your faults. But then there are the people who simply hug you, and they know that words won't help. Just them being there for you is enough. Even though it's dangerous, I still crave to travel to a beach. I want to dive into the salty water even though it dries my skin. I want to let the waves hit me even though I may drown. I want to see a moon jellyfish even though it may sting me.

Because everything in life comes in waves, especially grief. And the only thing we can do is let it come. The lows are just as important and impactful as the highs, and I know in my heart that my dad watches over me, rooting for me every day.



The Words I never Wanted to Hear by Katy H.

Loved one's diagnosis

The loss of my grandfather was strung with many words I never wanted to hear.

It started, of course, with “cancer.”

Stubborn as my grandpa was, he didn't want to go to the hospital when he was sick. Even when he was really sick. I guess it comes with being a cowboy. “If I go, who will feed the cattle? Who will put out the hay? Feed the horses, brush the horses, pick the dirt and rocks from their hooves? Who will feed the chickens, collect the eggs, shut them in their coop at night?”

I spent the early years of my life helping my “Papaw” with these chores as much as I could. Not that he needed the help then, of course; despite his age, he had spent his entire life working, and was used to it, and I'm afraid a 4-year-old attempting to help only made it more difficult for him. But he loved me, and he humored me. I would count cows while he fed them and rolled out hay; carefully brush the horses (or what I could reach of them) while he picked their hooves; pick tater bugs off the potato plants in the garden to feed the chickens while he collected eggs and checked for snakes in the coop. It is not enough to say we were close. We were partners.

When my Papaw went to the hospital, when he finally gave in and told us “I want to go” (a set of words I'd hoped he wouldn't have to say), we knew it was bad. We knew he felt bad. One of the first thoughts in my mind was, “Who will feed the cattle? The horses? The chickens? There is too much work to be done for him to leave, and I cannot do it by myself.” Of course, I supposed taking on his chores would fall on me. Being at the time almost 12, I felt myself old enough to do it, but the task was daunting. Luckily, or perhaps unfortunately, for me, I was not expected to take over his work, and my mother, grandmother, aunt, and uncle began doing as much as they could. However, now I was left out almost completely.

“Stay here,” they said. I hated hearing those words. So, this was my biggest worry at the time. That I was no longer allowed to help.

Even after the word “cancer” was brought into the picture, it never really sunk in for me. I went to the library, did my research on the word. I picked up a book. I read the first paragraph. It ended with the words “rarely survive”.

“It’s an old book,” I told myself. “Outdated. They can fix it now. He’s tough. He’s a cowboy.” I thought back to a saying I heard frequently at the rodeos I attended with him every year: “Fall down seven times, get up eight.” I told myself, “He’ll get up again; he always does, he always will. He’s a cowboy.” In my mind, nothing bad could really happen to him, not my Papaw. Nothing bad could happen to me. It is a mindset I believe many young children have: that nothing bad will ever happen to them, that bad things only happen to other people.

The next word I didn’t want to hear was “home”.

Home, of course, is a comforting thought. It is a place of rest, of safety. In relation to sickness, it usually means you’re better. There is no more need for doctors or machines plugged into you or constant drips of medicine. Home meant he would come back and I would keep helping him feed the cows, and I could ride the horses again (because I wasn’t allowed to go out riding without him, and besides, I never properly learned how to saddle them).

But when you’re still sick and they tell you to go home, it’s because there’s nothing else they can do. It’s because the doctors and machines and medicines aren’t helping. It’s because the chemo is making things worse.

When my Papaw came home, it was like looking at someone different. He, in my mind, was not my Papaw. I’d seen him in the hospital a few times, and in the hospital, his bony arms, his thin body under the hospital gown, what was left of his white, wispy hair, did not seem out of place. But seeing that same person laying on the couch where my Papaw used to lay didn’t seem right. It was like a stranger laying there. I felt a distance between us. The distance of a stranger. This was not my partner, not my Papaw. This was only cancer laying on the couch.

But still I was in denial. “He will be fine,” I told myself. “He will eat more and not have to be fed through a tube anymore, and he will drink lots of milk and get stronger, and his hair will grow back, and we will feed the cows and horses and chickens and go riding again.” And so I distanced

myself even more, telling myself everything would be fixed when he got better, and he wouldn't be a stranger anymore, and I would not need to distance myself anymore.

Then came the words... the worst words anyone can hear, ever. The words that never mean anything good, the words that can break a person's entire world. That broke my world.

"Papaw passed away last night."

I hate those words. "Passed away." It makes it sound nicer, calmer, and gentler than it is. "Passed away" means going gently, without pain, without suffering.

No. The word to describe what happened was "died." "Papaw died last night."

And suddenly came the regret. I regretted distancing myself from him. I regretted naively assuming he would get better, assuming that nothing bad could happen. I regretted everything I did leading up to that moment.

I thought back on that night. "How did I sleep?" I asked myself. "How did I sleep soundly, without nightmares, without tossing and turning and kicking? How did I not feel that something was wrong?" He was my partner, my Papaw. How did I not know?

8 seconds. It's not a lot of time. But at a rodeo, a lot can happen in 8 seconds. To a cowboy, 8 seconds is everything. 8 seconds can change a life, for the better or for the worse. "And if I only had 8 seconds." This is what I thought, in the depth of my regret. If I only had 8 more seconds with him. I would hug him again, really hug him, not the awkward side hug I gave to the stranger laying on the couch. Give him a kiss on the cheek, remembering the feeling of his stubble before he lost most of his hair. I would tell him I love him.

But I didn't have 8 seconds. Or I did, but I didn't use them wisely. I didn't realize they would be the last 8 seconds. Because how could I?

I never saw him again. His funeral was open-casket, but I didn't look at him. It wasn't him. The him laying on the couch was still him, but I hadn't realized. But this was not him laying in the casket. He was somewhere else, his soul was somewhere else. This was not him, this was cancer, laying in

the casket, so I did not look. People came by to console and reminisce, and say “I’m sorry for your loss,” and “He was a good man,” but I did not listen, because these were not the words I wanted to hear.

I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to hear him ask if I wanted to ride the horses, pick the tater bugs off the potato plants, count the cows. I wanted to hear “I love you, sugarplum,” just one more time. These are the words I wanted to hear.

Perhaps, if I had 8 seconds, I wouldn’t take them to show so much affection. Because he already knew I loved him. I never took hugging him and giving him a kiss goodbye for granted, because I knew how important they were, a nightly ritual. Perhaps, if I had 8 seconds, I would memorize his face: the nose that, had it not been broken so many times, would be just like mine, the eyes I can no longer remember the color of, the way they crinkled when he smiled. Perhaps, if I had 8 seconds, I would simply sit and listen to him speak one more time.

Perhaps, if I had 8 seconds, I would remember him better for the words he spoke to me. And I would forget the words I never wanted to hear.



We're Going to Take Care of your Mommy by Emilie D.

Loved one's diagnosis

August 23rd, 2021. I was sitting on the couch with my mom. I knew she was being evaluated for cancer, however, I didn't think much about it. Up until then, nothing bad had ever happened to my family. No significant deaths, divorces, major health crises, nothing. But then the news came in, "It's positive, I have cancer." I remember my heart dropping terrified for my mom and selfishly worried that I would end up with cancer myself. I texted my best friend the words "my mom has cancer". After that my mind entered a blur.

September 29th, 2021, my mother had her mastectomy. That day was also school picture day. I knew my picture was going to be terrible. I looked awful, puffy eyes from crying the night before and a face showing a month's worth of exhaustion. My grandfather drove me to school, and we took a selfie and sent it to her. I was terrified of losing my mom. I knew the odds that she died during this surgery were low but I also knew that it wasn't impossible. My mother is my best friend and biggest supporter. Later that day, I received a text back from my mom. It was a selfie of her in the hospital with a thumbs up. My mom was cancer free! I looked up at my chemistry teacher, Mr. Clark, (who is also my coach and true role model), and said, "Guess who's mom is cancer free?" He said, "Em, give me your hands." He squeezed them and he squeezed them hard. We stood there and we cried.

After that came preventative chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is a complete blur for me. I remember shopping for a wig with my mom and cleaning her hair out of the shower drain so she didn't notice it falling out. No matter how many warnings I had on the side effects of chemotherapy it didn't make it any easier to watch. I remember crying and shaking when I came home with Covid. I was afraid I was going to kill my mom. I don't remember much else about it.

November 25th, 2023, my mom's last Herceptin infusion. I was finally able to go with her. I watched as my mom sat in what she referred to as "the chair". The nurse looked at me and said "Sit right there, we're going to take care of your mommy." That sentence made me feel small again. All the memories of when I was a little girl with my mom came flooding back to me. I

realized that nurses had taken care of her all this time. Their expertise, comfort, and guidance had given her strength and confidence. I also realized it wasn't the researcher, the surgeon, or the doctor that told me my mom was safe. It was the nurse. The nurse was the one that said: "We're going to take care of your mommy". I realized that nurses are there for patients and their families every step of the way. Whether it's welcoming a new baby in the family or witnessing a family member's last breath, the nurse is always there.

Cancer changed my life that year and as I reflect, I see that it is a change for the better. My family is stronger than ever, and I have made the confident decision to attend Keene State College in the fall and major in nursing, to become an oncology nurse. When I tell people this, their first reaction is "That is amazing, you are going to be so good at that." That is always followed by, "That is going to be really difficult. Are you able to see patients dying? Do you know how dangerous it is to give out chemo?" The honest answer is, I do. I know I am not signing up to go into an emotionally easy profession. I know that there will be days where I go home and cry my eyes out. However, I also know how it feels to be a scared child. The child that lays awake at night worrying if they will have a mom next week. I also know how hard it is to watch someone you love struggle to be the person they used to be. I know the value of having a good nurse and someone that feels like they understand your struggle on a personal level. My mom's nurse kept telling her what a beautiful family she had and what good kids she had. He made an effort to not only get to know the patient but get to know the patient's family. I want to be a nurse like that, one that cares about all elements of the patient. I know one day I'll be looking at a scared daughter, and I will tell her, "Sit right there. We're going to take care of your mommy." but I'm going to add, "It's okay I've been in this chair too."

