CANCER PATHWAYS

TEEN WRITING CONTEST

2026 Winning Essays

A collection of heartfelt stories
written by teens facing cancer.

For 20 years we have been asking teens to tell us how cancer has impacted their lives through our Teen Writing Contest. Over 13,000 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've been a leader in empowering and educating teens on healthy behavior and choices that can reduce their cancer risk and improve health. For 20 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.

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. Visit us online at: *www.cancerpathways.org*

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From Me to You by May Nguyen

12th Grade, Washington State

"You're never going to speak normally again."

In an instant, a salivary gland cancer diagnosis began to change who I was becoming. Dressing up for football games turned into gowning up for surgery. Wingstop runs after tests became feeding tubes. Volunteering for others turned into the daily fight to lift myself up.

Post-surgery, my voice transformed into a monster. It loomed over me, always passing judgment on who I had become. It echoed in the beeps of hospital machines during the dead of night, in my grease-stricken hair, in the crumpled puke bags beside my bed. Every attempt to laugh, to ask, to speak up felt wrong. There was a sense of hopelessness in watching the voice that once built bridges between me and others slip away. Yet, despite the fear, I knew I needed a battle plan to slay this monster.

It was time to pick my weapon. I woke up at exactly 5 AM each day for my doctors' rounds. I listened intently to the milestones ahead and asked for details necessary to get myself back. I then carefully crafted each insight that I gained into a course for victory.

Rule #1: Speak to anyone and everyone I see, repeating myself until the confusion on their faces fades.
Rule #2: Record and replay my progress (analyze each syllable!).
Rule #3: Stretch the limits of my facial movements daily, millimeter by millimeter.
Rule #4: Feel the pain, cry the tears, but never let it bring me down.

The old facts are: Cancer is unpredictable and unforgiving. The new facts will be: I am equally unpredictable, forever more forgiving, and I am going to win.

Over time, I began to see the effects of my efforts. As my voice strengthened and the darkness of isolation gave way to rays of hope, I sought new ways to express it. I found myself gravitating back towards the journals hidden behind my closet door and the joy they promised. Each time my fingers touched a new page, I saw the potential to transform it into something distinct. I spent time recounting the events of my life and reflecting on what these moments meant to me. Every entry was accompanied by a combination of washi tapes, stickers, drawings, movie tickets, receipts, and scraps. If an item could be glued down and gave life to the page, I saw its value. When I finally included my proton therapy completion certificate, it was a physical manifestation of my success and a sign for a new chapter. A fresh mission emerged to reach others and turn recovery into something beyond myself.

Rule #1: Start a social media account about food that builds a community of thousands of people despite not being able to taste anything.

Rule #2: Talk to my care team about the choices that they make, observe how they physically and emotionally approach each procedure, and consider how I see myself in their roles in the future.

Rule #3: Continue my science courses independently and share my curiosity each time I get a chance to come to class.

This journey affirmed to me that a career in healthcare is the path for my future. I'm captivated by the way medicine bridges biology with care: how understanding proton beams or the anatomy of a nerve can restore both function and dignity. I want to return to that daunting hospital room, now on the other side, with a new perspective. Regaining normalcy is no longer my goal. I will use my voice that cancer once tried to silence to amplify others'. To heal with both science and empathy, and to embody the resilience that made me who I am today. I feared I'd never speak again. Now, I hope my voice helps others find theirs.

* * *

The Accident That Saved My Mother's Life by Ellie Sticha

12th Grade, Minnesota

The morning of my mom's car accident began like any other. She dropped my brother and me off at school, reminded us to have a good day, and drove away. I didn't know that a few minutes later, on an icy January road, every part of normalcy would shatter for years to come.

On her way home, she took a different route to get gas, when her car was suddenly struck by a drunk driver. I did not find out until my school day ended, and when I first heard, my heart dropped in a way I had never felt before. I understood that accidents happened to people on the daily, but in our small town, and my average family, this felt impossible. At the hospital, doctors examined her for injuries. Aside from bruising and some broken bones, she seemed incredibly lucky. Before she was discharged, however, a nurse ordered one final CT scan of her lower abdomen, just to be thorough. That extra scan revealed something none of us were prepared for: a tumor on her ovary.

Within a week, the tumor was surgically removed. We clung to hope when doctors suggested it was probably benign, until we got that phone call: Stage 1c 2 ovarian cancer. The word "cancer" lingered in my mind long after my mom told me. I was only eleven, but I understood enough to be terrified. I laid awake that night imagining a future where my mom wasn't sitting in the audience at my graduation, wasn't there for birthdays, wasn't there to watch me grow into the person she had raised me to be. For the first time, I truly understood that life could change in a single moment, and that tomorrow is never promised.

Yet, hidden within that fear was something unexpected. If my mom had not been in that accident, the cancer would have continued growing silently. Ovarian cancer is often detected late because symptoms are subtle and screening is unreliable, making it known as the "silent killer." The crash that felt like a tragedy forced doctors to look closer. It saved her life. That realization slowly changed me. At first, I was angry. Why did it take something so violent to uncover something so dangerous? However, as weeks passed and my mom began treatment, my perspective shifted. I stopped asking "Why us?" and started asking, "What now?"

My mom began chemotherapy during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The world already felt uncertain and isolated; now our home felt fragile too. I watched as the strongest person I knew became exhausted from treatments meant to heal her. I watched her lose energy, sleep, and eventually her hair. The image of my mother, who had always been my protector, tucked into bed all day for months is one I will never forget.

Our family dynamic changed overnight. My dad stepped into roles my mom had always managed. He cooked meals, grocery shopped, and tried to hold us all together while going to work and carrying his own fear. My brother became my ride to places I could not drive myself. After surgery, I helped my mom with anything I could; I brought her water and sat beside her during days when the house felt too quiet. Supporting her in those ordinary moments taught me more about love than any grand gesture ever could.

It was difficult to see her need help with tasks she once did effortlessly. However, caring for her helped me discover a strength within myself I didn't know I had. I became more independent, managing school responsibilities while balancing worry at home. I learned how to stay steady even when my mind raced with "what ifs." I learned that resilience is not loud or showy; sometimes it is simply showing up every day, even when you are afraid.

With church doors closed due to the pandemic, I found myself turning God more and more each day. I found strength in prayer, knowing I needed to trust the plan God had for my Mom and family. I prayed for healing, strength, and peace in the unknown. Trusting Him did not fully erase my fear, but it reminded me that there was reason in the chaos. Over time, that belief transformed me, and I began to see that while we cannot control what happens to us, we can control how we respond.

In June of 2025, after surgeries, chemotherapy, and many appointments, my mom was declared cancer-free.

I remember the relief washing over me, and tension being lifted off of my family. The accident that had once seemed like the worst day of our lives ultimately led to early detection and survival. But the experience left a permanent imprint on me.

I no longer see ordinary days as ordinary. Having dinner together, a car ride to the store, a quiet conversation in the kitchen: these moments hold weight now. I recognize how quickly life can shift, and I refuse to take time for granted. Cancer affected my family deeply, but it also strengthened us, teaching us to lean on each other in times of trouble. Most importantly, it shaped the person I am becoming.

I am more empathetic because I understand what silent battles look like. I am more responsible because I learned that sometimes others depend on you to be strong. I am more grateful because I know how close we came to a different outcome. I am more driven because I have witnessed firsthand how fragile opportunity can be.

Education is no longer just a path toward personal success; it is a gift. The chance to plan a future with my mom cheering me on is a privilege I do not overlook. The resilience I developed during her illness will follow me into every classroom, every challenge, and every goal I pursue. When coursework becomes overwhelming or obstacles arise, I will remember isolation, treatment days, and quiet prayers, and I will remind myself that I have already endured something that once felt impossible. The accident that day could have taken everything from us, but instead, it gave us more time. More birthdays. More conversations. More memories. It gave me perspective, maturity, and a deeper understanding of love. Sometimes the most devastating moments become the very ones that save us.

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The Time My Little Brother Grew Much Bigger Than I by Avery Parkinson

12th Grade, Massachusetts

Finishing up the 5th grade, I had sworn to a great responsibility. As depression made it more and more difficult for my mother to play an active role in her children's lives, my family had decided to proclaim me "mini mom". I have since taken on great tasks, such as carefully curating back-to-school outfits for my brothers, editing hundreds of grocery lists to make sure my family's diet doesn't consist of Frosted Flakes and Ellio's pizza, and becoming an even greater annoyance to my Dad, reminding him to not forget deadlines to sign my brothers and I up for tryouts and the like. I've been the typical bossy older sister, the name "Mom" being given to me by mistake in the midst of arguments over clothes left on the bathroom floor, becoming a title that reminds us of how we are missing that person in our lives.

The summer of my Junior year, however, the extent to which I could offer a helping hand to my family began to diminish. There was something wrong with my brother, Liam, and the pain he was experiencing was an unwelcome member of our family. We tried to tell ourselves it was just some sort of pulled muscle he had acquired after weight lifting. But after what seemed like months of restless nights, where the house would be filled with the muffled sound of his screams pressed deep into his pillow as he fought off his unbearable pain, we all knew this could not possibly be the answer. Watching Liam battle something he could not see and did not understand was a feeling far more helpless than any stack of dirty dishes I had once thought to be a burden.

On August 11th of 2024, Liam was diagnosed with B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia. The skills I had learned with my time served as "mini mom" could never have prepared me for the emotional and physical toll this condition would take on our lives. Everything about his condition was unfamiliar and daunting. Cancer was something I had only seen portrayed in sad movies like The Fault in Our Stars and news headlines shining light on the tragedies of others…It's not something you ever picture finding its way into your own life, until it does.

The first few months of his treatment were the hardest to bear. My house didn't feel like a home with Liam gone at the children's hospital for months at a time. With every trip I took to the hospital, I saw his clothes fit looser and looser. His warm face became almost translucent. His big, bright eyes now appeared dark and hollow. I watched him struggle to walk a few feet to use the bathroom, tethered to an IV pole, his body completely worn down from medications that were supposed to be saving him. From the outside, it looked as if leukemia had stripped him of everything that once made him shine bright. But this was never true.

I didn't fully understand this until the day Liam had his first surgery, the day he got his Port-A-Cath implanted. Any kid undergoing surgery for the very first time will inevitably be scared. And I'm sure he was. When I saw him after surgery, being wheeled back into his room, his skin stained bright orange from betadine, his eyes half shut, I didn't have enough strength in me to hold back my tears. Seeing him in such a fragile, uncertain state set something off in me, and there was nothing I could do to help him. I closed my eyes, preparing to process what was happening once I opened them again. I didn't want to open them again to see that same, horrible sight of my brother. And just to my luck, when I opened them again, what I saw was different. Liam was smiling. He didn't look like some unrecognizable version of himself, swallowed by a hospital gown and orange paint. He looked like the Liam I've always known. Despite all the reasons Liam had to be scared, sad, and confused, he chose to smile. It was here that I truly understood that Leukemia was not going to take Liam away from me. It had weakened his body, but he was still the strongest in the room. It would never diminish his spirit.

Liam is my little brother, and I have always been expected to be a role model for him. For years, my strength has revolved around being "mini mom" and holding everything together so no one else had to see the flaws in our lives. Liam has redefined strength for me. Strength doesn't come from hiding vulnerability, or being the most organized, or having all the answers. Strength was waking up from surgery, your body aching and mind exhausted, and choosing to smile. It's enduring months of pain that couldn't be explained, and still choosing hope when fear would be easier.

I felt helpless, not being able to do a thing about my brother's diagnosis, the way I could simply do a load of laundry or check off a to-do list. Liam showed me that being strong doesn't always require a problem to be solved. Sometimes, it means standing still inside the storm and refusing to let it change who you are. Liam is my little brother, but these past two years have made me grow to look up to him in ways that surpass any wisdom I have tried to give him by a long shot. He has taught me more about courage than I have ever learned in my seventeen years, even with all my effort to be the "responsible one". Every day, I try to be half as brave as that boy who was able to give me a smile in one of his darkest moments.

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From IV Lines to Finish Lines by Caleb Cook

12th Grade, Texas

Stars blur at the corners of my eyes as years of progress flash against the concrete beneath my feet. I am on mile sixteen of The Woodlands Marathon, and my mind races faster than my legs, chasing memories of who I used to be. In this moment, clarity arrives with exhaustion. I take in a deep gulp of air, reminding myself that adversity has taught me far more than comfort ever could. The taste of salt on my lips pulls me back in time, into the burning glow of hospital lights at Texas Children's Cancer Center, where the sharp tang of saline once filled my mouth while nurses flushed my IV.

I settle into a rhythm, one foot after the other, letting my breathing steady as the miles stretch ahead of me. I am seventeen years old, surrounded by runners who look much older than me, and I catch people glancing at me with disbelief as I pass. They don't know that I'm not here to prove anything to them. I'm here because I almost lost this body. Every step feels intentional, like a promise to the version of myself who once lay in a hospital bed, wondering if I would ever feel strong again.

At six years old, I learned what it meant to grow up overnight. I was still learning my ABCs when the hospital replaced those simple lessons with complicated words like leukemia, chemotherapy, and immune system. I didn't understand the explanations, but I understood the worry on everyone's faces. I learned early how to watch people closely, how to sense fear even when no one said it out loud.

On the first day of treatment, a nurse knelt beside my bed and told me something I didn't understand yet. She encouraged me not to think of what was coming like a sprint, the way people usually do if they get a simple illness. This would be more like a marathon, steady and long, and the only goal was to keep going. At the time, I didn't know what a marathon really was. I just knew I was already tired.

For years, my life revolved around treatment. I spent long days in hospital rooms, enduring spinal taps, IV chemotherapy, and more pills than I could count. Some days were loud with machines and voices, while others were quiet and lonely. Playgrounds felt like a thing of the past.

As I grew older, I often thought about that confused six-year-old version of me. That's what led me to write a guidance book for newly diagnosed leukemia patients. It was my way of making something frightening feel a little less confusing.

Mile 18. I'm getting closer. I brushed off my face so I could read a sign someone was holding in the crowd. She coughed. That instantly took me back to one of the scariest lessons I learned during treatment. I caught RSV, something that sounds harmless for a nine-year-old, but my immune system was too weak to fight it, and what began as a simple cough quickly became life-threatening. I came closer than I understood at the time to not making it through the night. The uncertainty went on for ten days. After that, I learned that some of the most dangerous things don't look dangerous at all.

I keep running, but my chest tightens anyway. To everyone else, it was just a cough. To me, it's a reminder of how much can be happening beneath the surface. I learned early that danger is often invisible, counts dropping, lungs tightening, a fever that doesn't look dramatic until it is. From the outside, I often looked fine. Inside, I knew how quickly "fine" could turn into an emergency. So when someone is quiet or distant now, I don't assume they're fine. I assume they are human and try to reach deeper to see if I can help.

A man lifts his hat as we pass, a small gesture that catches my attention. You would think the memory of losing my hair three different times would bring sadness, but I find myself smiling. I remember a teacher who let my entire class break the school rules and wear caps so I wouldn't be the only one covering my head. In that moment, dignity was handed to me through kindness. I didn't get to choose whether I had hair, but I learned how powerful compassion can be when control is out of reach.

A little girl cheers nearby, popping candy into her mouth as she waves at the runners. The sight pulls me back to kindergarten classrooms inside the hospital, where I attended candy swallowing lessons so I could learn how to take chemotherapy pills. Soon after, I was swallowing more than fifty pills at a time, taking chemotherapy by mouth every single day for more than three years. What looked playful to the crowd once meant survival to me.

Further along the course, I notice a child sitting cross-legged on the pavement, with schoolbooks spread out, studying as runners pass by. I slow my thoughts more than my pace. I would have done anything to sit in a classroom again. I missed more than a year of school because I was too sick to attend, and when I finally returned, I saw education differently than most of my peers. Even now, I approach learning with gratitude because I know how fragile access to normal life can be.

Somewhere along the way, cancer changed how I think about time. I stopped assuming tomorrow would always come the way I expected. During treatment, life was broken into small pieces, one pill, one appointment, one good day at a time. That became my normal, and in a strange way, it made everything feel manageable. I learned to focus on what was right in front of me instead of worrying about everything at once.

That way of thinking never left me. I still approach challenges one step at a time, trusting steady effort more than quick results. I care more about showing up consistently and doing the work, even when no one is watching. Running a marathon feels familiar for the same reason treatment once did. You don't conquer it all at once. You earn it slowly.

Cancer also taught me to see people differently. For a long time, I looked healthy even when I wasn't. I learned how easy it is for someone to be struggling quietly. Because of that, I listen more than I speak. I try to be patient before I judge. I know how much it matters when someone notices you without needing an explanation.

So here I am, on mile 20, wiping salty streams of old memories from my face. Behind me are years of growth and the lessons that shaped me along the way. In front of me are miles of progress and challenges I have yet to uncover. I realize, long before crossing the finish line, that it won't define success for me. It's the hard work and the willingness to keep going, one step at a time, that I will be most proud of.

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Draw Four by Sigrid Shwartz

12th Grade, Michigan

If you want to understand my family, hand us a deck of UNO and cancel your plans.

My sister studies her cards carefully, silently. My mom insists she's playing for fun, then sweeps five rounds in a row. I reorganize my cards constantly. I track what's been played, trying to stay three moves ahead. In UNO, as in life, timing decides everything. The Wild Draw Four is the card you hold until you absolutely have to use it. Played too early, it reeks of panic. Played too late, it's useless theater.

I learned that at twelve, the first time my mom was diagnosed. Teachers were told. Coaches were told. Friends were told. Every missed practice came with an explanation, every late assignment with a backstory. I laid the card down again and again, until the corners were folded and soft.

Hi. Sorry. Draw four.

It felt responsible, a way to stay in control of my own narrative. And at first, it worked.

People were kind.

Then careful.
Then suffocating.

Conversations stalled when I walked up. People tilted their heads when they talked to me. Teachers praised me for things that had never required praise before. I hadn't changed, but the way people looked at me had.

"You're so strong."
For turning in my homework?
"You're handling this so well."
I had brushed my teeth and shown up.

No one meant harm, but I stopped feeling like myself. I was either fragile or inspirational, and neither of those felt accurate. I was just really, really tired.

When you play the Wild Draw Four that early, the entire table accommodates. Every move you make is interpreted in relation to that card. If you stumble, it's pitied. If you succeed, it's extraordinary.

Eventually, my mom's treatments ended. Appointments spaced out. Life resumed its regular rhythm—school, rowing practice, college talk at the dinner table. The cards were reshuffled, and we kept playing.

Then, about a month ago: another scan, another appointment, another doctor. And like that, the Wild Draw Four showed up in my hand again. Same card, different round.

This time, I didn't slam it onto the table. I didn't want my failures pre-forgiven or my successes over-interpreted. I didn't want to be handled like something fragile.

With my sister at college, the game moves faster. I filled her old spaces—earlier mornings, more driving, schedules stacked on schedules. Up front, I was still the reliable one: the friend with the notes and the athlete who never missed practice. Because nothing slipped, I felt a private, desperate pride.

Look at me, I thought. No one even knows.

But pride is a lonely substitute for help. You can ace the test and still feel like you're moving through thinner air, rationing each inhale while everyone else breathes normally.

I likely would have stayed silent if my physics teacher hadn't noticed first. Not in a dramatic, after-class way. Just during a lab. I was stuck on the same question, first convinced the instruments were wrong, then convinced I was. Around me, pencils scratched, stools scraped, people packed up and moved on. He stopped at my station and looked at me. Not my paper, me.

"You seem stretched thin lately," he said. "You sure you're okay?"

It was a delicate observation, offered with enough space for me to lie if I wanted to. Usually, the "I'm fine" is automatic—a reflex that keeps the air thin but stable. But hearing it out loud made the card I'd been harboring feel heavy, visible, and suddenly impossible to tuck back into my sleeve. If he could see the strain from across a lab table, the masquerade was already over.

I stared at the numbers on the page, rechecking the same calculation, pretending the problem was physics. I didn't want to be dramatic, but I was out of breath.

So I leveled with him. "My mom's cancer is back."

I braced for the pity, the tilt of the head, the sudden fragility. But he didn't recoil or offer a hollow "I'm so sorry." Instead, he pulled up a stool and sat, not to demand more information, but just to anchor the moment. He stayed there for a beat, letting the air settle, acknowledging the weight of it without making me carry his reaction to it, too.

Then, he nodded and asked what I needed to stay on track. Deadlines. Options. Logistics.

That was it. No spectacle. No orchestral swell. It was almost boring, which turned out to be the kindest thing it could have been. He showed he cared by refusing to treat me like I was breaking. He drew his four cards and kept playing.

It was the first time I'd played that card without the entire table freezing. It gave me the courage to stop hoarding my hand and see who else was ready to keep the game moving.

The final pathology report hasn't come back yet. I've told a few close friends now, shared some of my cards. The conversations have been simpler than I expected. No one has tried to frame me as brave or broken. No one has handled me like glass.

I'm starting to understand, mid-round and without any neat conclusion, that the hard part isn't just the diagnosis; it's the constant, clumsy calibration of timing—figuring out when to speak and when to stay quiet, trying to gauge how much of my 'hand' people can handle before they start to treat you in that specific way.

There is no five-year hindsight here; the house still hums with medical vocabulary and the low vibration of waiting. There is just the weirdness of being mid-round, sitting in that strange, thin air where you're constantly calculating the cost of your own silence.

Cancer moves with alarming speed, while reflection lags behind. However, if there's a lesson forming, it is less about resilience and more about honesty. The Wild Draw Four isn't a weapon or a confession. Keeping it doesn't make you strong. Playing it doesn't have to make you manipulative. It is simply part of the deck you were dealt.

The game does not implode when you reveal your hand. Most people are capable of adjusting without theatrics. They draw their cards. They make space. They continue.

Which is all I want.

That, and a healthy mom.

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The Grace That Carried Us Through by Emma Bode

12th Grade, Louisiana

Cancer is a word that carries a specific kind of gravity. It is not just a medical term. In my family, it has always been a ghost that haunted our hallways and a thief that stole our peace. Long before I truly understood the biology of cells or the mechanics of medicine, I understood the weight of that word through my Aunt Shannon. Although I was a little too young to understand everything that was going on, I was always attentive enough to see how it affected those around me. For a very long time, she was locked in a battle with cancer—a battle that was as exhausting as it was courageous. To the world, she was a patient, but to my family, she was a true sign of the beautiful parts of life. She was the person who could end a bad day with a single look, the one whose laughter felt like a safety net. When she eventually lost her life to the disease, the silence she left behind was deafening. It didn't just affect my family; it reshaped us, leaving a heavy scar and a lingering grief that taught my brother and me that some monsters are real, and sometimes, the monsters win.

Because of the loss of such an amazing person, my childhood was colored by a quiet, subconscious vigilance. I knew what the "worst-case scenario" looked like because I had sat in the front row for it. I had seen the way this lost battle affected my family: the gradual fading of strength and the ultimate, heartbreaking goodbye. I thought that by losing her, we had somehow earned a lifetime of immunity from further tragedy. But life, as I would soon learn during my freshman year of high school, does not work on a system of fairness.

Freshman year is supposed to be a threshold, a time of transition where you trade the comforts of childhood for the independence of young adulthood. It is meant to be defined by new friendships, the stress of Geometry, and the excitement of high school football games. For me, however, a defining moment of my freshman year didn't happen in a classroom or on a field. It happened while I was standing at the kitchen counter.

I remember the atmosphere of that day with clarity. There is a specific kind of stillness that settles over a house right before bad news is delivered—a "heavy" air that makes it hard to sit still. My mom called my brother and me into the kitchen, where my dad was standing with her. I could tell by the way they were standing together, and by the way they looked at us, that the world was about to shift. When my mom told us she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, time didn't just slow down; it stopped.

The immediate reaction wasn't logic; it was a flood of memories. My mind didn't go to survival rates or medical advancements. It raced backward to my aunt. Terrified that such a fate would be bestowed upon someone so important to me, I started to cry. My brother joined me. We were terrified for my mother's future because we knew exactly how high the stakes were. We knew that "cancer" was a word that could lead to an empty chair at Thanksgiving and a void in our hearts that nothing could fill. The idea of yet another beautiful human being having to go through something so horrible made my stomach tighten.

However, amidst the terror, there was a glimmer of hope that we hadn't had before. My mother explained that her case was "minute"—a small, early detection that changed the trajectory of the battle. While my aunt's fight had been an uphill climb against a late-stage enemy, my mother's diagnosis gave us a tactical advantage. But that didn't make the solution any less daunting. To eliminate the cancer and, more importantly, to kill the "what-ifs" that would haunt us forever, she decided to undergo a double mastectomy.

The decision was a heavy one. A double mastectomy is not just a surgery; it is a profound sacrifice. It is a choice to let go of a part of oneself to ensure that the whole survives. For my mother, it was an act of ultimate protection. She wanted to be there for our graduations, our weddings, and our futures. She was willing to endure the physical and emotional toll of a major operation to ensure that my brother and I would never have to experience the same loss we felt with our aunt.

The weeks leading up to the surgery were a test of our faith. In our family, faith isn't just something we talk about on Sundays; it is the bedrock we stand on when the ground starts to shake. We leaned heavily on the grace of God. My brother and I spent nights talking, navigating a sea of anxiety that felt too deep for us at times. I prayed for steady hands for the surgeons, for a spirit of peace for my mother, and for the strength to handle whatever came next.

The day of the surgery remains etched in my mind as a marathon of waiting. I was unable to go to the hospital while my mom was in surgery, which left an uneasy feeling in my mind. I checked my phone, waiting for any sort of update from my dad. I wished that none of this had ever happened—that my family didn't have to go through such anxious times. But I also felt a strange sense of calm—a "peace that surpasses all understanding." I knew that we were doing everything humanly possible, and the rest was in God's hands.

With the grace of God, the surgeons removed the cancer, and because of the double mastectomy, the chances of it returning were virtually eliminated. The "minute" case had been met with a massive response, and we had won.

But the victory wasn't just in the surgery; it was in the recovery. Watching my mother heal was one of the most formative experiences of my life. I saw her in pain, tired and fragile, yet she never lost her spirit. She navigated the physical limitations of her recovery with a quiet dignity that redefined my understanding of strength. Strength wasn't about being untouchable; it was about being broken and choosing to put yourself back together. It was about waking up every day and choosing to heal, choosing to hope, and choosing to believe in a future.

Today, my mother is a survivor. She is a living testament to the power of early detection and the miracle of modern medicine, but more than that, she is a testament to the grace of God. Her recovery was full and complete, leaving us with a sense of gratitude that is impossible to put into words. We are the lucky ones. We are the family that got a second chance.

This journey has changed me in ways I am still discovering. As I navigate the rest of my life, I carry a different perspective than many of my peers. I know that life is fragile, and I know that health is a gift, not a guarantee. I have learned that "family" is the only thing that truly matters when the world gets dark. My aunt's passing taught me how to grieve, but my mother's survival taught me how to fight.

I think about my aunt often. I like to think that she was watching over us, guiding the doctors' hands and whispering strength into my mother's ear. I think she would be proud of how we handled the storm. We didn't let the fear of the past dictate our hope for the future. We took the heavy legacy of her loss and used it as fuel to be proactive, to be brave, and to be faithful.

If I am awarded this scholarship, it will be more than just a financial benefit for my education. It will be a tribute to the two women who shaped my soul: the one I lost and the one I get to keep. It will represent the resilience of a family that faced the same monster twice and found the strength to keep standing. Cancer took a lot from us, but it couldn't take our bond, it couldn't take our faith, and it certainly couldn't take our future. We are moving forward, not in the shadow of the disease, but in the light of a recovery that feels like a miracle every single day.

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"Fear of Yourself" by Liise Karu

11th Grade, Wisconsin

I was fifteen when I got diagnosed with brain cancer. That is the average lifespan of a dog. Was I about to become one of them? This diagnosis forced me in a battle with my own body, filled with fear and denial. It took away the safest place I thought I could have: my own brain. And the worst part is, it doesn't only affect the person diagnosed, it affects everyone around them.

The words no one prepares you for: "You have cancer". The words echoed through my head while the monitors of the machines beep around me as I attempted to take a deep breath, only to be suffocated by the strong smell of cleaning products. Even though I have just been given the worst news a child could ever receive, my focus instantly shifts on the person next to me: my mother. I see her whole world collapsing in her eyes. After all, her biggest ray of sunshine and hope has been sentenced to an illness that is often called a "death sentence". Somehow, seeing the closest person to you in that state, makes you shift all your focus away from your own well-being while shifting every single bit of that focus on others to make sure those people are doing okay. I almost feel like I should apologize, like it's all my fault. But it is not my fault, right?

While others my age were worried about weekend plans, I was busy learning how to survive in a version of life I never asked for but I now had to live with. Full of uncertainty, I remember laying down after my surgery, overhearing people talking through the loud, annoying beeping noises of the machines- a sound I learned to find comfort in. It took me a while to figure out what they were talking about. After a while, I realized that their topic of discussion was my prognosis. I was just 15 when my chances of survival were put into a percentage.

"A number between one and one hundred, is this all I am?", I ask myself as I still struggle to hear the nurses talk through the noisiness of the hospital.

After a couple of days in the hospital, I learned that I have to adjust to a new "normal" now. It is not about what I want anymore, It is all in the hands of what the future holds and what the people around me think is best for me. I no longer was in control of my life, the pain was. Although the pain was in my physical body, a lot of its heavy weight had been put on my heart as I watched all my friends have fun through their social media posts. Did they even miss me?

I quickly got used to my nurses being my new best friends, as they are what gave me the strength to fight my way through this life altering time. Finally getting my scans back clear was a bittersweet experience. As eager as I was to get out of that place, the goodbyes with the doctors and nurses felt like the death of my first pet. The sense of safeness and care the nurses had given to me reminded me exactly of his soft fur and the trusting look in his eyes.

As I left the hospital, I remember looking at the other children and sending a few prayers their way, hoping that one day, sooner than later, they would also make it out of this place. I know this isn't over for me yet. I will have to relive my worst nightmare over and over again every three months, as that is when MRI-s take place. Oh how I wish there was a cure.

I still think about those kids from time to time, "Were they able to get out?", I think to myself as I remember the countless, straining days I spent in the hospital. The thought of them makes me inspired to make something of myself. After all, I was in their shoes once, I would know better than anybody else what they go through. I am determined to one day go back to those kids, and help them out, as well as find light in a hopeless situation as my nurses did to me.

Cancer may have stolen my childhood at fifteen, but that does not mean I will let it define the rest of it. Surviving this experience was not easy, but it taught me things I simply could not have learned any other way. It taught me about patience, empathy and hardships in life as well as taught me a lesson about mindset. Though I wouldn't wish this on anyone, I do believe it gave me an amazing skillset to now continue living my life fully with.

The place I thought I was the safest in: my brain, turned out to be my greatest enemy. It forced me to feel the greatest feelings of fear and uncertainty. Even though it was working against me, I learned valuable lessons about empathy, strength and everything else that really matters in life. What I once saw as an end became a new beginning, the chance to grow in so many ways I would never have imagined a person could.

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The Riddles She Left Me by Arianna Huizar

12th Grade, Texas

"Soy chiquito, soy bonito y mi casa llevo en mi lomito. ¿Qué soy?"
(I am little, I am cute, and I carry my house on my back. What am I?)

My Mama Delia asked.

After many tries and a lot of hints from my Mama Delia, it finally came to me.

"¡UN CARACOL!" (A snail!) I shouted.

"¡Hasta que!" (Finally!) my Mama Delia laughed.

I was sitting on the floor while she lay on the sofa in the living room. Her long white hair, tied in a bun, rested against the armrest. We did this every evening. She was the only adult who talked to me for a long time. Everyone else was busy at my Nina's restaurant or uninterested in talking to kids. We were each other's company.

When she left for the United States for two weeks, it was her first time ever leaving the country. She went to Disneyland and loved it. I stared at a picture of her wearing a Minnie Mouse headband, her white hair loose and flowing. It was the happiest I had ever seen her. I realized how much she loved active environments. She liked parties, movement, and fun. Even at seventy, her enthusiasm matched mine as a child. Maybe that was what made our relationship so strong.

When she returned from California, she started to get sick. At first, it was quiet. Then people began bringing her food. Medications appeared on the table. Doctors came and went. There were no more riddles because she was sick. Two weeks of no stories. Two weeks of the absence of my Mama Delia.

After those two weeks, she was taken to the hospital. My mom explained that Mama Delia was very sick and that I needed to visit her. When I walked in, the sharp smell of rubbing alcohol and the cold air conditioning hit my face. The lights were painfully bright. I was excited to see her, to hear riddles, to return to our routine.

When I entered her room, her scent was still there. Citrus and clean clothes. She was awake, oxygen tubes resting in her nose. She smiled and asked me to hug her. I walked over and hugged her tightly.

"¿Me cuentas una adivinanza?" (Will you tell me a riddle?) I asked, smiling, searching for something familiar.

"No, Arianna, ahorita no. Dale un beso y baja con tu Nino," (No, Arianna, not right now. Give her a kiss and go downstairs with your Nino), my mom said from behind me.

I kissed my Mama Delia and turned to leave. As I walked away, she stopped me and placed something in my hand. A pair of gold earrings with a red gem in the center.

"Ten, póntelos. Son tuyos." (Here, put them on. They are yours.)

Something inside me knew it would be the last time I would see her, so I smiled and hugged her as tightly as I could.

I kept the earrings in my hand the entire way home. They were heavier than I expected, as if they held something more than gold. I did not understand then that she was giving me more than jewelry. She was leaving herself behind.

Almost as if she knew she would not make it.

Two days passed without any news. On the third day, she seemed better. She stood up and walked, as if filled with sudden energy. Later that night, my Nina cried all night. The kind of cries that stay with you. The kind that settle deep in your chest. Everyone cried. I stood in the doorway, waiting for answers. No one told me anything. No one thought I would understand.

But I did.

I knew my Mama Delia was never coming back.

She was diagnosed with lung cancer, and within two weeks she was gone. She never knew she had cancer. She passed away without knowing what was killing her.

For a long time after, I waited on that same sofa. I sat the way I used to when she asked me riddles, hoping she would call my name from the kitchen or laugh from the couch. I believed that if I waited long enough, things would return to normal. They never did.

Her funeral was heavy. The smell of roses and fresh wood filled the room. People cried around me, and I felt confused and angry. I did not understand why my Mama Delia had to leave. That day, I was angry at God. I stayed angry for a long time.

When people say children do not understand loss, they are wrong. I understood it in the silence. On the empty sofa. In the way no one asked riddles anymore.

As I grew older, I asked the questions I could not answer as a child. Why did she get lung cancer? Why did she go so quickly? Why did no one tell her she was sick? My Mama Delia never smoked. The cancer came anyway. Understanding the reason did not ease the loss.

The three months doctors predicted became two weeks. No one told her she had cancer because they were afraid she would lose hope. Knowing this did not make losing her any easier.

The anger I felt toward God slowly turned into acceptance. Into a deeper understanding of death.

Even now, I hate the smell of roses and fresh wood. They remind me of the last time I saw her.

Looking back now, I am grateful she had those two weeks. I am grateful she laughed, walked endlessly through Disneyland, and wore a headband meant for children. Knowing she experienced that joy before she passed brings me a quiet sense of peace.

My Mama Delia used to ask me what a caracol was. A snail carries its home wherever it goes. I did not realize it then, but she was teaching me how to survive grief. How to keep moving even when something precious is gone. How to carry love when there is nothing left to hold.

I still carry her with me. In the riddles I remember and now tell my little brothers. In the earrings she gave me, which I wear on days when I need to feel brave. They remind me of the strength of the bond we built and the love she trusted me to hold.

Like the snail she once asked me about, I learned to carry my home with me. My Mama Delia never came back, but she walks with me everywhere I go. She was not just part of my childhood. She is the reason I know how to love, how to grieve, and how to keep going.

I discovered that love does not end when a life does, it simply reshapes it.

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What I Remember by Caleb Frederick

12th Grade, Oregon

Dear Mom,

Since the day you passed, I've discovered that a new fear has preoccupied me. The fear that I'll forget.

Perhaps it's silly to think I could possibly forget the mother who raised me for 17 years, but then again, I never had the greatest memory. Each day I lose more and more, and I don't think I'd be able to forgive myself if I let you fade away, so I've been taking time to write it all down.

I remember when you told us.

It's December 26th, and you and Dad have Josh, Ethan, Luke, and me all seated in the living room. I could tell it was something serious. Your faces were stained with pensive melancholy. You prefaced the news with encouragement, as if somehow a cozy blanket could ease the pain of a speeding bullet. That's the thing about that word, it feels so harmless, so distant, so benign, until it lays its hand upon your life. Cancer. The house was still dressed in all the Christmas joy that had taken place the day before; it did little to comfort us. We all had questions, desperate for something to hold on to. "How long?" I barely mustered through the tears and trembling.

"We don't know."

I remember the years that followed.

The hospital records would tell you it lasted only three months, but the gravity of the situation and the sheer volume of stimuli pushed and pulled at my perception of time. Cancer became the author of our lives. Each edit, each revision of the script, became the way things always were. Our entryway was adorned with industrial oxygen tanks, our walls with breathing tubes. The humming of the breathing machines replaced my understanding of silence. What was it like before? I didn't know anymore; my brain couldn't keep up, and life was moving too fast for me to slow down and process it.

Everything happened in those three months. Every other weekend, I was away competing at speech and debate tournaments. During the school week, I was occupied with composing and practicing our percussion ensemble. And when I got home from school, I had to help pack. Dad had realized pretty quickly that we'd have to move to somewhere more accessible for you, so we did. We packed up everything we needed and threw the rest away. We didn't need most of our things; we just needed you.

Through it all, even when each step had become a battle, and standing had become a rigorous workout, you never stopped being our mom. You still wanted to know how I did after each tournament. You still came to see our performances. You still joked, teased, and laughed all the same. You had no expectation of beating cancer, but you never let it beat you.

I remember when things got worse.

Each week brought a new report, a new scan, a new test. They were rarely reassuring. We had to get a new oxygen concentrator after the old one became insufficient; it hummed louder than the first. But even with the new machine, you couldn't move much. You watched TV most days, and we all started watching it with you. I don't think it would have mattered what was on the screen; we just wanted to spend time as a family. The cancer had other plans.

You couldn't stay at home anymore, for not even the new machine could make up for your deteriorating lungs. You stayed at the hospital now, and it was unclear if you'd ever be able to come back, so we started coming to you. Your hair was falling out, your body looked frail, and your skin was losing its color, but you were still Mom, so we would drive out to the hospital whenever we got the chance. Home became where you were; the house was just the place we slept.

I remember the last time we spoke.

I came to visit the night of my birthday. You had missed the festivities, so Dad and I came by to fill you in. We talked and laughed about nothing important, our conversation illuminated only by the light that crept in from the hall. For just over an hour, we sat there, joking. The topic of the conversation was wildly underqualified to be our last time talking with one another, but no one thought it would happen as quickly as it did. When it got late, Dad and I hugged you goodbye, and you told me that you loved me for the last time.

I remember the end.

It was March 28th, and we were all crowded in your hospital room. You had fallen into a coma earlier that morning, and the doctors informed us you likely wouldn't wake up. Siblings, Grandparents, family, and friends all assembled in that room, sharing memories of you. Just last Christmas, we were gathered around a tree with smiles on our faces; now we were gathered around a hospital bed with tears streaming from our eyes. As it approached midnight, we sang together as a family, prayed for you, and then sat in silence as we watched you leave us. All in tears, we hugged each other, Dad signed the death certificate, and we went back to the house.

I remember when it dawned on me.

I was going to read at your memorial. Dad had compiled a short list of stories provided by your parents and each one of us, at least that's what it was supposed to be, but I couldn't think of what to write. I searched my memory, trying to grab hold of a time before all this chaos, but I could only retrieve wispy fragments. I couldn't remember much of anything beyond the three months where it had all occurred, and it terrified me. I sifted through the sands of my mind for every detail, every moment, every word I could recall, trying to prove to myself that I had loved you. The gaps in my memory weren't just forgetfulness; they were my failures to honor you. You had given me life, you had raised me, and you had loved me more than anyone. You had made me who I was.

You made me. I realized then that almost everything about me can be traced back to you. You were the one who pushed me to join speech and debate in high school. I had always liked arguing–that, too, is your doing–but I had never thought about doing extracurriculars. After your consistent nagging, I went one day and never stopped. Competing in tournaments, traveling the state, and learning more about the world, all things I adore doing and wouldn't have ever gotten the chance to do were it not for you. This year, I'll be going to the national tournament of champions in parliamentary debate; you did that.

You were the one who gave me my love for music. First, you drove me to learn violin. You bought me my own instrument, paid for lessons, and came to every recital. When I gave up the violin, you convinced me to try piano, and it stuck. More than playing music, however, you inspired me to write music. Those times I was messing around on the piano, and you complimented my playing, that's where it started. The percussion ensemble piece I wrote that year, you weren't able to watch us play it at state, but we ended up placing second with it; you did that.

And I could go on. My love for school, for musicals, for traveling, my entire personality has your name written all over it. I spent all this time obsessing over every little detail, trying to keep every part of your memory alive, but the truth is, I can't forget you because I am a living remembrance of you.

So, Mom, I wanted to let you know that since the day you passed, I've overcome a new fear. The fear that I'll forget. I've come to realize that while my memory might wash away, the passions you've stirred in me are unlikely to fade. I still wish you were here, helping me write these essays instead of me writing about you, but through those years, hidden between winter and spring, you've shown me what a life well spent looks like. I had hoped that we would have more time to create new memories together, but even in the limited time we shared, you transformed my life. Ultimately, I hope to follow in your footsteps. I will cherish each second I have, however mundane, and make the most of it. I don't know what my future looks like, but if I could just shape one person for the better, the way you did for me, I will have succeeded.

And if I ever do, it'll be because of you.

Love, Caleb

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My Roses by Payton Vogt

12th Grade, Connecticut

We were there for roses. I remember the smooth, cold feel of the shopping cart handle and my dad beside me. We moved through the dimly lit meat section of ShopRite, chilled by gusts of air spilling from the freezers. Just ahead was the flower aisle - our destination. My dad reached for a small, red bouquet. The flowers seemed random. It was early February, so maybe it was for Valentine's Day. That had to be it. As we walked on, I softly asked what the roses were for. He hesitated before saying, "We'll talk tonight."

That's when I knew something was wrong.

When we arrived home, my parents sat my brothers and me down on our black leather couch. It was dark, maybe 7 pm. I don't remember exactly what was said at that "meeting." All I remember was the buzzing of a heating vent, yet I knew what was being said.

My mom, the lively, determined woman I knew, started having health issues four months prior. Once dancing from lab to kitchen, she began to spend more time bedridden. Her once bright blonde hair grew thinner and matted. As the pain slowly built for her, so did my role within the family. At the time, I thought nothing of it.

Until that night, when my parents finally spat out the news, the buzzing stopped. I heard only four words: Stage four colon cancer. I glanced away to shield my sadness from my parents, when my eyes stopped on the dull roses. I saw no beauty, only thorns.

For weeks, I was depressed. I felt a numbness I would never be able to explain. But life didn't stop, so neither could I. I pushed myself to do more. More work. More chores. More responsibilities. Whether untangling hair, cooking meals, or talking until she fell asleep, I was her anchor. All to show my family or maybe myself that I wasn't fazed. That I was okay. That I was perfect.

Life went on like this for two years, and in 2023, my mother was admitted to hospice. Knowing she didn't have much time left, I went every day for as long as possible.

On February 14th, I went to her room for what I thought could be a good day. My dad followed me, red roses in arm and a pained smile on his worn face. That was the last time I saw my mom. I woke up on February 15th to a new form of silence and the same red roses from yesterday on the counter, looking more wilted than the day before.

Afterwards, I fell into a cycle where instead of doing too much, I wasn't doing anything at all. I sat and watched as those same roses wilted into dust, wishing I too had done the same.

I came to learn grief is not loud. It is quiet.

For the longest time, I didn't know how to talk about grief, especially when no one around me did. I felt like I was grieving in a world that expected me to move on. That silence is what inspired me to break mine.

Eventually, I launched a podcast called Good Grief – Notes to My Mom, where I could talk openly about my loss. So, teenagers like me could feel without judgment.

The first time I recorded my voice, I hated it. It felt unnatural to talk about every emotion I've had since 2021.

That was until a girl I didn't know mentioned my podcast, explaining that hearing me share my grief helped her understand her own. Her words, though brief, helped me to continue doing what I love.

Currently, I'm sitting at my desk, recording my next episode. I glance to my right at a vase of red roses, letting me know that grief is still with me. This time, when the roses wilt, I won't. I'll bloom.

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Fifteen and Fighting by Janelle Valencia

12th Grade, Georgia

At fifteen, most girls worry about school, college, crushes and their appearance. On the contrary, I was more worried about whether my next chemotherapy would let me see my senior year. Every day became a countdown, each treatment was a test of not just my body, but my hope. I isolated myself from everyone because disappearing was easier than facing reality. While I learned to navigate through infusion rooms and my countless restrictions and rules, everyone else was happy and living their teenage life. For the most part I was a normal Hispanic teenage girl who had just celebrated her quinceanera. I never expected to be rushed into the emergency room and receive countless tests, blood transfusions, and blank stares from doctors who had no clue what was wrong with me or why I was rapidly losing blood. It was not until a biopsy, removing a golf ball sized inflamed lymph node from my neck, revealed I not only had cancer but that it was so developed that it was stage four Hodgkins Lymphoma.

Looking back, the signs were all there. I remember the first time I noticed a small ball on my neck causing pain, the excessive and unexplainable weight loss, the loss of color in my face, the constant drowsiness and fatigue, the vomiting, and emotional rollercoaster I was constantly on. It all clearly indicated something was wrong with me, but I ignored every symptom brushing it off as stress and my asthma. My life altered its course forever with that diagnosis, and I felt every aspect of my life being controlled and supervised.

On September 7, 2023, I was on a surgery table prepared to get a cyst taken out and my port, a medical device that would distribute my medicine, all in one. I remember waking up confused and in so much agony. I remember receiving my first chemotherapy a few hours after my surgery. The nurses had to access my fresh port with a stapler-like needle while my entire body was shaking from my fever and pain. I remember the pain in my parent's eyes as they held my body down watching me scream in pain for what felt like an eternity. I refused to eat or talk, instead I spent my recovery crying, angry and alone.

One of the first things I said when I found out about my diagnosis was "How am I going to tell Emily?" Emily, my best friend since middle school, had a mother who was battling breast cancer at the time. The day Emily found out about my diagnosis she was walking to my house and got a call from her mom with the news. Emily wiped her tears and spent hours with me watching shows and helping me feel better for a while. From the day she found out my diagnosis to the day I rang the bell, she was my rock and the person who always made me feel better. Anytime a new side effect from the medicine started taking its toll, she would be there. When I had bell's palsy and my doctors thought I was having a stroke, she stayed overnight at the hospital and comforted me through my uncontrollable sobs. When my foot drag made it hard for me to walk, she slowed down her pace to walk slowly with me. When my mental health was clearly struggling, she convinced me to try therapy. Emily gave me hope to keep going through it all.

Chemotherapy was one of the hardest things I have ever experienced in my life. I had to get my port accessed. After my blood was drawn it had to get flushed with saline water that I could taste. My medication started and I could feel my strength weakening and my nauseousness taking its toll. The last medication I received was the worst I could barely walk after it. It was a small syringe of thick yellow liquid that had to be injected slowly. It was the hardest part of my treatment because it was the final punch in the gut for me. I could not do anything at home but sleep and be nauseous for weeks. I wanted to throw up 24/7 with that resting feeling in my throat with nothing ever coming out.

For six months every fifteen days I had to go into the infusion room to start my medication, and the process would start all over again. Any time my life started feeling tolerable, I would get knocked down again. Just a few weeks after my surgery, my grandfather died of diabetes. I never got a chance to meet him, and he was not aware of my condition and never would be. I started dreading waking up in the morning, and I saw no point in living most days. I would wake up to see my hair on my pillows, clothes, blankets, and floor. Not only was it mentally painful to watch my thick wavy hair fall out, but it was also physically painful. I would feel sore and itchy on my head as each bald spot on my head started to grow. I felt ugly inside and out.

A couple months into chemotherapy I finally felt a change. It was not a drastic change, but it was an advancement from where I was months prior. I started physical and mental therapy, homebound classes, got a wig, started attending church, and discovered hobbies to focus on when I was feeling bad. I had always been a very smart and dedicated honor student, but taking homebound classes forced me to drop multiple of my advanced classes. It was disappointing but crucial to my recovery. Overtime I was able to maintain good grades in my homebound classes, and I found myself opening up to my therapist instead of crying for the entire session. I started to spend my time baking, reading, painting, donating at my hospital, or volunteering at my church.

Donating at my hospital was one of the few good memories I have in the hospital. My parents and I would donate snack bags to Conquering Unmet Research Experiences Cancer Organization (CURE) for patients to enjoy while in treatment. We gifted nurses and doctors' homemade badges for their ID cards and brought them donuts in the mornings. I knew firsthand what it was like to be the patient lying on the hospital bed, so I made sure to add snacks that would not make them nauseous. I felt a lot of pride in finding a way to make someone's day better, and I knew whatever I did in the future had to have that effect.

Finally, after my six months of treatment, it was time for me to have my CT scan to see if the medication worked. The anxiety I felt that week was so gut-wrenching that I could not focus on anything but my results. Finally, at my appointment on March 28, 2024, at 8:48am I was told I was finally cancer free. I cried immediately, but for the first time in months they were happy tears. I was finally done with the nightmare I had been experiencing for almost a year, and I could finally go back to my normal life.

I thought my life would go back to how it used to be before my diagnosis, but I was completely wrong. I still had appointments, therapy sessions, and medication I had to take. I thought I could forget I ever had cancer, but it always seemed to follow me around, and I did not know how to avoid it. I started to learn to live with it and accept that cancer has been a huge part of my life for a year. I no longer gave my diagnosis power over me, and I decided I would be proud of overcoming that obstacle instead of hiding it. I still get nauseous at the smell of salt water, hand sanitizer, jolly ranchers, and chalky pills. I still cry a little when I remember where my life was two years ago, and I will not eat or do certain things that remind me of cancer sometimes, but I am no longer the girl I used to be. I live with my scars, side effects, and aftermaths from my medication with happiness because they remind me how far I have come. I learned to be proud of myself and I'm glad that cancer taught me to value everything and everyone in life.

Having cancer was the experience that revealed just how much I liked creative design and made me want to pursue architecture in college to be a landscape architect and be able to turn broken foundations into beautiful and sustainable buildings. I was once a broken foundation with my entire world collapsing but now, I am a seventeen-year-old senior who takes hard advanced placement classes, reads a new book each week, bakes on weekends and is outgoing and finally full of life.

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The Dead Parent Club by Alex Brand

11th Grade, California

There is an exclusive society you can only join once, and only if you're unlucky enough. There are no applications, no interviews, and no confetti-filled acceptance emails. Membership is automatic, abrupt, and permanent. The only qualification is losing a parent as a teenager.

I joined at fifteen, though my initiation began a year and a half earlier.

The club doesn't really have a name, at least not one said out loud. There's no handbook, no website, and no orientation packet, but if there were, it would probably be called something blunt and uncomfortable, like The Dead Parent Club. No one wants to belong or talk about it, and yet you may find yourself recognizing other members. There's a certain look people have when they've learned too early that life does not negotiate.

My invitation arrived one Friday at the beginning of winter break in eighth grade. I came home elated, already thinking about two weeks of freedom, only to find my parents sitting me down at the kitchen table. Their faces were solemn as they exchanged a look that told me something wasn't right.

My dad began with a sentence that has since changed the trajectory of my life.

"Do you remember how we thought Mommy's hand wasn't working because of carpal tunnel? The doctors ran some more tests. They found something in her brain — a tumor. She's going to need surgery."

Tumor… I rolled it around in my head for a moment, sounding it out letter by letter. It was a word that felt serious but distant, like something doctors handle, something you hear about on television, something adults worry about… not fourteen-year-olds. No one said glioblastoma, and no one said terminal. At least, not yet.

My mom lived for eighteen months after that conversation: long enough for hope to exist, and equally long enough for it to slowly erode.

Her decline started gradually. My mom developed aphasia that stole her ability to form complete sentences, and when she repeated the wrong word while asking for something, I learned to translate what she really meant. Soon, the right side of her body began to fail. Her hand stopped working, standing became difficult, and ordinary movement required extra effort. Somewhere in the middle of it all, I became a caregiver without a title or training. Every morning before school and every afternoon after, I was by her side, helping her walk, interpreting her speech, and fetching medications while trying to keep my head up during the hardest days of both her life and mine.

My mom must have tried everything: surgery, radiation, and many doses of chemotherapy that were adjusted each time one stopped working. My fourteen- and fifteen-year-old self struggled with geometry, yet I could name powerful drugs and their purposes — Temozolomide, Lomustine, Avastin — as if memorizing them gave me some sense of control. She wore a device called an Optune, shaving her head to attach transducer arrays and carrying a heavy battery pack in hopes of shrinking the tumor. Each time a treatment showed promise, it eventually failed, and the doctors would pivot again. Pill bottles filled our house. Their sickly orange hue burned into my mind, becoming something that made my stomach churn. She even attempted physical rehabilitation, spending her last birthday in a room on the sixteenth floor of a cold, dark glass building.

Nothing worked, and over time, it became increasingly clear that my mom would not get better.

And so, I became a member of The Dead Parent Club on June 10, 2024.

Perhaps this sounds wrong, but when it happened, part of me felt a strange lightness, as though a weight I had been bracing under for months had finally dropped. Living with a terminal cancer patient carries an emotional toll that few people understand, especially when you are in eighth and ninth grade, trying to appear normal. Every afternoon upon arriving home, I prepared myself to witness more decline, existing in a constant state of anticipatory grief where the waiting was its own kind of suffering.

Now that I am part of this unfortunate club, I have learned that it comes with rules.

Rule #1: Your life splits into a Before and an After.
Before, when your parent is sick but alive, your worries revolve around caregiving, grades, and friend drama layered over a preemptive fear that lingers in the back of your mind. And After, grief settles into the spaces where joy once lived and reshapes once ordinary moments without hesitation.

Rule #2: You quickly learn which conversations you no longer belong in.
When friends complain about a parent being "so annoying" or "so overprotective," you nod and offer a small smile, resisting the urge to say, "at least you still have them," because why make the conversation awkward?

Rule #3: Everyone will call you "strong."
Adults say it with admiration, teachers say it gently, and peers say it in solidarity, but to me, strong doesn't mean fearless or extraordinary, but rather, showing up anyway. It means walking into school while your world is unraveling at home and finishing assignments while silently counting down to a day you know is coming.

These rules aren't written anywhere, but they are what ultimately shape you.

For eighteen months, we waited, dreading the inevitable while imagining relief that never arrived the way we expected. Today, grief still clings to me like a heavy backpack, but as I continue carrying it, it grows lighter and more manageable. Some days it presses hard against my shoulders, threatening to make me buckle; other days it feels almost weightless, and for a moment I forget I'm carrying it.

Carrying that weight has changed the way I see other people. I am more compassionate and careful now, as not many people in my life knew what my family carried for eighteen months, and that realization makes me hesitate before judging what someone else might be hiding. Such a loss sharpens your awareness, not only proving to you who will stay by your side but teaching you to value them fiercely.

Despite everything, this club is not only about loss; it is about love. Grief is love with nowhere to go. My mom may be physically gone, but she lives on in my DNA, in my mannerisms, and in the many hopes and dreams I carry forward.

I would not recommend this club to anyone, nor would I wish membership on my worst enemy. I did not choose to join, but I can choose how I live now — fully, for myself and for my mom, who did not get the time she deserved. That, I think, is the true message of The Dead Parent Club: you don't emerge untouched, but you do emerge — and sometimes, that is more than enough.

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Where the Light Falls by Alex Cox

12th Grade, Maryland

My Oma loved the sun.

She loved its warmth, the way it flooded through the ancient crags and valleys of her face like a rushing river and suffused her smiling eyes. She loved the way beams of sunlight danced across the ocean waves lapping against her feet as she captured her grandchildren in play, her bulky old camera stringing years of sand-crusted summers together into a symphony of childhood happiness. She loved sitting on her old sun-bleached lawn chair in the front garden and turning her eyes, clear and blue as her prized hydrangeas, to the sky— angled, like a flower, toward the bright sun. In her house, the windows were never closed, the door always ajar to let the light in.

I never knew why Oma loved the sun so much. Maybe she'd loved it since she was little, when she'd called it die Sonne and tried to grasp its glinting rays between chubby toddler fingers. Or maybe she'd fallen in love with it when she woke up one day in an unfamiliar place called Amerika to the sun filtering through the window and bathing her face in light. Maybe throughout her long journey from Germany to the USA, she'd found that the sun was the only constant, the only thing she could hold onto when so many things— her family, her home, her life— were slipping like ash through her fingers. I think about it often now, but when I was little, my Oma loved the sun, and I loved my Oma, and it was as simple as that.

When Oma began to falter, I didn't think it was anything to worry about. I was eleven, and back then, death was a phantasm, a made-up cautionary tale: Always wear your helmet, or you'll end up like Mom's student who died in a motorcycle accident. I'd never met an actual person who had passed, and I was never going to. I was eleven and invincible, impervious to tragedy. Besides, Oma was so full of energy, always planning our next beach trip or family dinner. Death couldn't take a person who still had so much left to live.

Life went on like normal, and everything seemed fine. But when I look back on those last few years, I notice the signs I wish I'd seen before: the canceled vacations, the constant naps, Oma's boundless energy withering into fatigue. Suddenly, it was my aunt snapping photos of my sister and me at the beach; suddenly, it was my mother mixing the dough for Oma's famous chocolate chip cookies. The January that I turned thirteen, my parents got the call they'd been waiting for. They sat me and my sister down and, for the first time, told us the truth about our grandmother.

I remember not being able to pronounce it at first, much less grasp its meaning. Melanoma. What was that, a kind of virus? No, a cancer. What kind of cancer? Skin cancer. How'd she get it? Well, you know how much Oma loved the sun. She was always outside, but she never wore sunscreen. The UV rays damaged her skin, caused the cancer. It's metastasized now, spread all across her body. There's nothing they can do.

When it finally hit me, it was like a punch in the gut. Oma spent every minute she could in the sun. What kind of life is that, where your favorite thing kills you from the inside? When I went to my room to pack for the emergency trip we were taking to my grandparents' house, I drew the blinds down on my window, turned off the light, and fumbled for my overnight bag and a change of clothes in the dark. It was hard to pack when I couldn't see a thing, but it would have been even worse to feel the same sun that was killing my grandmother shine happily on my face.

When we got to my grandparents' house, the door was locked and the windows closed. Stepping inside was like entering a nightmare: everything that should've been washed with light was shrouded in darkness, cast into the shadow of my Oma's impending death. Eyes trained on the floor, I stepped into the living room, where Oma lay swallowed by a mountain of pillows and blankets, her frail arm hooked to an I.V. bag, the eyes that had once sparkled now dim and shadowed. When I took her papery hand in mine, the kiss she pressed to my fingers was as cold as death.

Oma died the next day.

It took me a long time to understand that my grandmother was really gone. Summers at my grandparents'— no, my grandfather's— house felt bizarre, as though I were baking, reading, or playing next to a ghost. I sat alone for hours in the garden, letting the sun burn my shoulders, oscillating between wondering idly when Oma would call me in for dinner and picking at the petals of the blue hydrangeas that still blossomed every year like nothing had happened. I didn't know who to blame: was it the sun's fault for damaging Oma's skin? Was it Oma's fault for staying outside all day and refusing to wear sunscreen? Was it my fault for not seeing what was right in front of me, not acting sooner? Years later, I've realized that nobody is to blame— not my grandmother, not me, not even the melanoma. Life doesn't work like that. It's random, it's messy, and, sometimes, there just isn't a reason. Sometimes grandmothers die, and granddaughters grieve, and then we keep on living beneath the same sun that painted over the cracks in our grandmothers' faces with golden light.

One of the many photos from Oma's old camera, taken when my sister and I were just toddlers, hangs over my desk in my room. Chest-deep in ocean waves, we smile and wave wildly at the camera— or rather, the person behind it. My Oma is no longer here, but the memories I have with her, though they fade with time and fray with wear, are as warm and constant to me as the sun she loved so much.

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Polished by Camryn Dallas

12th Grade, Texas

I have a box of 62 nail polishes under my bed. The box is not very old, but its worn cardboard edges have started to fray after hundreds of openings. I used to paint my nails multiple times a week—much more than anyone I knew. This ritual began one night when, on a whim, I decided to paint my little sister, Kitty's, nails. She felt sick that night, but still requested that I paint her toes a vicious pink. We sprawled out on my bedroom floor. Taylor Swift's Folklore played in the background. We listened and sang sweetly. August slipped away into a moment in time. Despite her despondent disposition, the bright color of the polish made her smile. That was my first lesson that details matter.

The next morning I woke to the warm amber of a late summer morning light streaming through my window. I could hear birds chirping outside but inside, my house was unusually quiet. Then the phone rang, piercing through the eerie silence. It was my mom calling from the ER. Kitty had been admitted with a brain tumor. My legs gave out and I fell to the floor. I looked to my hands. I noticed the way my imperfect polish clutched my cuticle. I peeled and ripped the childish imperfections off as tears raced down my red face.

I remember suddenly walking helplessly through the ICU, a place I had never been before. Walking down a maze of sterile white halls, I felt struck not just by my sister's unexpected illness but by the environment itself. In the hospital a maze of linear spaces stretched endlessly, seemingly drawing lines to nowhere as fluorescent lights glared overhead. The occasional pop of color from framed children's artwork was swallowed by the overwhelming feeling of spatial emptiness. This space seemed to be designed for function rather than healing. How could a child get better in a space like this?

In desolate hospital rooms, that year would look like a constant obsessive cycle of applying and reapplying nail polish. I remember holding my sister's pale hand during rounds of chemo and choosing a blazing orange which I then carefully painted onto her nails. Time would pass and my actions would remain constant, an endless search for a controlled moment in my seemingly uncontrollable life.

My hands shake as I smear the polish. Stop it. Stop shaking. The paint dries and curls around my cuticles, hugging them tight. I'm not satisfied. They're suffocating me. I can't breathe. I take a cotton swab and scrape the polish off. I grab a new color, this time an aggressive yellow, and try again. After endless attempts of applying and reapplying over a night, my acetone dry hands would finally get the right balance of paint on a single perfect nail. If I could get it right, these tiny changes could make a big difference in our lives.

If I could paint a perfect nail, my sister wouldn't have cancer.

It was in this pursuit of perfection where I found myself noticing things I had previously overlooked: how color could shift a mood or how light could expand a space. I was again reminded of the way Kitty smiled after I had painted her nails that first night. Here, the point wasn't perfection. It didn't matter what each nail looked like, all that mattered was the way the small bright color could light up a room. Small changes could be transformative. I turned to the hospital room, searching on how to create real change in the space around us. Though it wasn't curing her cancer, curating the details of her hospital room on the Oncology floor—covering the walls with Eras Tour posters, rearranging her furniture, placing a bonsai tree on the windowsill—brought a desperately needed warmth into the sterile space. It not only softened the atmosphere, but lifted the spirits of the people in the room. These details were bigger than they might seem. They have the power to heal. Despite the overwhelmingness of the space and circumstances we found ourselves in, I could bring about change through the details of my environment without the obsession the polish brought with it.

I have always had an innate sense of curiosity, but the habit of noticing small details stuck with me that year, inspiring my Gold Award—the highest service project obtainable in Girl Scouts. Just as I had filled Kitty's hospital room with comfort, my project aims to transform the spaces of other children going through similar experiences she had. I want kids walking through less than inviting hospital halls to turn the corner into their room and feel at home despite being in such a foreign space. It starts small. I've begun working with Texas Children's Hospital to put up a poster from a child's favorite artist or bring in a throw blanket in their favorite color means so much more than just the simple action; it's a way for a child to reclaim a space and ground themselves despite the uncertainty and fear that hangs heavy in the air of the medical spaces around them. What started as something small for my sister has turned into a mission to help other kids feel grounded in healthy ways.

I remember sitting with my sister at home one day after she had just "rung the bell," signaling the end of her treatment. My box of 62 nail polishes sat open in my lap. I held her hand and chose that same vicious pink I had used that first night. I haphazardly painted each nail before looking up to see a small smile on her face. I smiled too. I knew then and know now, I can bring about the change I wish to see one imperfect detail at a time.

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The Signal: Nose, Ear, Nose, Chin by Rilyn Rogers

12th Grade, Georgia

My daddy has a signal he uses only for me. With his index finger, he touches his nose, then his right ear, then his nose again, and finally his chin. To everyone else, it looks random. To me, it has always meant, "I love you".

He came up with the signal when I was little. Together, we would watch his favorite team, the Atlanta Braves. He told me that if players could have secret signals, we could too. He never shied away from sending me our sign. He could be in a crowded room, in the stands at a game, at the dinner table, or on FaceTime, and with a quick glance, I would see him moving his index finger, nose, right ear, nose and chin. When I saw it, I knew all was right with the world.

When I was fifteen, I thought the hardest inning of my life was over. I had just finished a year battling pseudotumor cerebri syndrome that sent us from Atlanta to Boston for treatment. There were days when spinal taps were the only relief. There were appointments when a pediatric ophthalmologist calmly explained that my peripheral vision would never return. Through every drive, every waiting room, and every hard conversation, my daddy showed up for me. I watched him balance a demanding career with being present for me. When I felt fragile, he felt indestructible. When I was scared, he gave me the sign, nose, right ear, nose and chin. I always answered with the same.

As I was preparing for my senior year of high school, my daddy sat me down at our kitchen table and told me he had stage three cancer. I remember watching his mouth move and feeling like the words were coming out in slow motion. Maybe it was my brain refusing to process the words. I felt like I was having an out of body experience. Cancer was something I heard about in other families, yet suddenly it was ours.

His treatment, consisting of chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery began quickly. Our family calendar was full of appointments. I sat in waiting rooms and watched nurses call his name instead of mine. I learned new medical vocabulary. I learned to read his posture. And I learned to recognize when he was pretending to feel better than he really did.

The physical changes were gradual at first. I noticed that he moved a little slower. He began to eat less. Then the changes became undeniable. The strongest man I had ever known had to pause halfway up the stairs to catch his breath. His voice, once strong and confident, sounded weak. There were mornings I remember him sitting at the edge of the bed for a long time before he could stand. And when he did, he shuffled his feet to the bathroom where he would vomit and sweat and vomit some more.

I remember the first time I saw my daddy's hand tremble when he gave me our sign. All the details are etched into my brain. I had a feeling inside me that something had changed. I had always associated our sign with love and reassurance. Now I saw the effort behind it. I began to recognize that strength is not the absence of weakness. Sometimes strength is choosing to keep giving love even when your body is tired.

That dreadful year, cancer did not stop with him. Within the same period, both of his brothers were diagnosed. My Uncle Robbie died. My Uncle Ryan survived, but his twenty-seven-year-old daughter Carmen was diagnosed soon after and lost her life. It felt impossible that one family could absorb so much loss in such a short time. Cancer kept stepping up to the plate and striking my family out.

Grief layered itself over everything else. One week we would be celebrating a clean scan. And then the next week we were dressed in black for a funeral. I learned that cancer is not a single event. It is a season that stretches longer than you expect or want.

As my daddy began recovering from treatment, we began to enjoy a level of cautious relief. But just as we did, he suffered a widow maker heart attack, the kind that only a small percentage of people live through. He survived, but survival required another change. He had to retire from the career he had built for years. My mama had a full-time job but added three part time jobs to her plate. I watched her leave before sunrise and come home long after dark, knowing she really wanted some time with her family, especially my daddy. We started having direct conversations about finances and I saw how quickly security can change. Yet, I also saw resilience up close and personal.

Cancer reshaped how I see health and time. I no longer assume either is guaranteed. I do not postpone saying what matters. Through every diagnosis, treatment, funeral, and recovery, my daddy never stopped giving me the sign. Even when his voice was weak, when his energy was limited or when fear lingered quietly in the background, he would touch his nose, his ear, his nose, his chin. I always answered with the same.

Baseball is a game built on return. You can strike out and still step back into the batter's box. You cannot control every pitch, but you control whether you keep swinging. Cancer stepped up to the plate more than once in my family. It changed our lineup. It forced adjustments. It altered plans we thought were fixed. But it did not take away our signal. When my daddy gives it now, it still means I love you. It also means we are still here. We are still fighting. We will play the game courageously until the last inning is called and the season ends.

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Live Gold: Navigating Life After Childhood Cancer by Reese Erlain

11th Grade, Indiana

A Tootsie Roll.

That's what I was supposed to be dressed up as for Halloween of 2008. My parents had it all planned out: their first Halloween with their first child on vacation in Arizona, going door to door around with my aunt and uncle in their neighborhood with me in my stroller like I was some grand prize of their marriage. But, of course, when we came back, they would eat "my" candy for me- typical parent move.

Spoiler alert: I never got the chance to wear that Tootsie Roll costume. I'll let you take a wild guess why.

I was only about three months old when the cancer circus came to town, so I have to rely on my parents to recount the rather painful details of my diagnosis and treatment. I always feel bad for making them relive the memories every time I ask, but I also know it's important for me to understand my past- it helps me come to terms with who I am today and the struggles we had to go through as a family to where we are now.

It had all happened too quickly, they said. The first thing they remember was that they had taken me out to a restaurant with my aunt and uncle, where they tried to feed me through a bottle, but I refused to drink for some reason. When the same situation occurred the next morning, my parents started to worry and decided to bring me to a pediatrician. Although the pediatrician wasn't able to pinpoint exactly what was wrong with me, she knew that whatever it was required ICU treatment. On Halloween night of 2008, instead of trick-or-treating with my parents, I was at Banner Hospital in Arizona, where the lead oncologist had to deliver the devastating news to my parents: I had Infant Leukemia- specifically acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

My treatment timeline was a blur- so much happened in so little time that events got lost in translation. About 7 months, plenty of rounds of chemotherapy and radiation (I had so many that my parents lost count), and one stem cell transplant later, I was declared to be in remission. My parents temporarily moved in with another aunt and uncle who happened to live a few blocks away from the hospital, since for the next month or so, I had to stay within a few minutes of the hospital in case any other emergencies arose. Finally, in late June, I was able to go home. I was officially cancer-free.

That was approximately sixteen years ago.

Now, having spent those years in remission, my life has been relatively stable. As a junior in high school, I take AP classes. I'm involved in several extracurricular activities. I get plenty of piles of homework a day (no excuses for me, unfortunately). I've even started to look into a few colleges, my sights currently set on Purdue West Lafayette, where I plan to major in clinical psychology.

My life is… normal, right?

Haha, no.

No, no, no.

Not in a long shot.

See, being a cancer survivor doesn't exactly mean happily ever after the minute you're discharged from the hospital. It means having to go back to the hospital where I was treated several times a year for various check-ups and monitoring. It means having a short stature due to all the chemo and radiation I received (and I'm not talking a cute little 5' 2"… I'm talking 4' 7"). It means looking in the mirror and seeing all kinds of marks all over my body from where my chemo port and stem cell transplant catheter used to be. I essentially fought in a war, and I have the scars to prove it.

But cancer survivorship also means something beyond physical imperfections. Cancer left me with mental and emotional scars as well, even if I don't remember having it. Years ago, I faced ridicule and teasing from my peers when I tried sharing my experience with them. As of now, it affects my thoughts, the way I view myself internally, and the way I interpret the meaning of life. It's likely going to be that way for as long as I live- but that, strangely, brings me a sense of comfort. It'll remind me to stay in the moment and enjoy the little things more often.

My life took a significant turn when my parents told me, at around seven years old, about a camp for kids who have or have had cancer. At first, I was skeptical due to how much I'd struggled to make friends who didn't see me as weird or contagious, and I wasn't sure what to expect from an experience like this one. Eventually, though, my parents were able to push me over the edge, and I'm glad they did, since this camp would become one of the most important aspects of my survivorship.

At camp, I listened to kids talk about their diagnoses and treatments as if they were something as casual as the weather- but each of them was affected by their journey in many ways. I saw other kids with similar or worse scars than mine. If anything, the best thing that happened there was when I became friends with a girl named Harlow, whom I'd met a few times before, since we apparently went through treatment together at the same hospital around the same time. However, we never became close until that summer. Harlow and some of the other girls in our cabin that year would become my close friends for the next ten years, up to now. This summer, however, will be the last one where I'll be able to attend this camp as a camper. However, I have the opportunity next summer to train to become a counselor, and my camp friends and I are planning to pursue that path together. In the meantime, I'm going to live in the moment and cherish the memories for as long as I can.

And speaking of counseling… I know this may seem far-fetched from where I stand now, but if there's anything I want to achieve from a psychology degree, it would be to become a therapist for cancer survivors one day. In my eyes, it's a win-win situation– I'll have the opportunity to use my experience with cancer survivorship to help other children and teens navigate their own post-cancer journeys, and I may learn valuable insights about myself from them. I understand what it's like to navigate uncharted territory in my own survivorship journey, and I want to make that process easier for kids and teens who might be facing similar challenges.

While some may believe that a cancer survivor therapist's job might not seem like anything significant or noteworthy, in reality, these people can change a person's whole world. I never realized it back then, but the therapist I saw when I was in elementary school actually helped me in many ways, even if it was for small things like coping with anxiety during timed tests (which, regardless, I still hate with burning passion). Although she might not have delved into the technical aspects of being a cancer survivor, I'm glad she was a part of my life, even if it was for a short while. She, like my camp friends, made me feel normal while also accepting me for my physical and mental differences.

It's possible I may never know what being a survivor truly means. A challenge with uncharted territory that no one talks about is that you not only don't know what it is, but also how long it will last. But what I do know is that I'll always have the support of my parents, relatives, camp friends, counselors, and therapists. No one should have to fight alone. Gold is the color for childhood cancer, and it's the color of the pin I wear on my backpack as a reminder of how far I've come since my days in the hospital. It's the color of the many sunsets I've seen at camp that remind me I've lived another day, and a better one could be coming tomorrow. It's the color I'd imagine my own soul to be: precious, irreplaceable, and resilient.

I once heard someone say you shouldn't just live for yourself, but in spite of those who wish you dead. Live despite the experiences that could have caused you not to be here today. Upon hearing those words, I took them to my heart, and I haven't let them go since.

Now, I'm not just surviving. I'm living. I will live for those who did and will not make it through their cancer battles. I will live in spite of the fact that there was a chance I could have not made it past my first birthday- yet this May, I will be seventeen years cancer free.

For now, I live gold.

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Beyond That One Word by Olivia Mederos

10th Grade, North Carolina

One word can change a person's life forever. For both me and my mother, that word was cancer. It's a heavy word, holding heavy meaning, but it's more than just a word. It's a catalyst. It's a disruptor. Cancer isn't something that just goes away. It's something you have to learn to live with; something you have to learn to embrace, no matter how many different directions it ushers your life into. It's a word people have to go beyond.

Cancer.

I was nine years old when my mother was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. I remember walking into my parents bedroom and sitting next to her. I remember how she smiled at me that night. I remember how she tried not to cry. I remember how she tried to make it seem like it wasn't a bad thing. When I received the news it was as if my brain shut down. I didn't know what to think, I didn't know what to feel, I didn't know what to do. My comfortable reality was gone… and so was my mother's.

I remember wrapping my arms around her and how she finally gave into her tears and I into mine. I had never seen her cry like that before. I wanted to comfort her more than anything; to put her shattered pieces back together somehow. Even after that night, I could never really grasp my feelings on the matter; cancer. I didn't like that word. "Cancer." It seemed nostalgic and foreign all at once. It made my stomach turn. Whenever I thought about my mother's condition, it was almost as if I couldn't feel anything while also feeling everything at once. I couldn't process it. My brain wanted to block out every negative emotion. It grew numb to the reality my family had succumbed to. The numbness almost made the idea of cancer bearable… but it didn't make it any less real. Either way, I had to accept that cancer was the sixth member of my family. I never talked about my mother's cancer with anyone for the duration that it lasted. I would hardly ever bring it up with her. I was almost scared to have any remarks on the subject, as if mentioning it would harm her even more. Sometimes I'd lie in my bed and wonder why I felt… nothing? That, at the time, was the only word I could think of to describe how I was feeling. Some nights I would cry just for the sake of crying. Eventually I understood what my feelings truly were; they were not of nothingness, but of an overwhelming amount of sadness, fear, and anger. A sadness of knowing that there was nothing I could do for my mother, a fear of losing her, and an anger directed towards the disease that chose to forever change my mother. Though I'm not sure if I actually understood the gravity of cancer fully at the age of nine.

Cancer.

Before cancer, my mother used to be the one dropping me and my two younger brothers off at elementary school and taking us to our extracurriculars… Now it was my dad. My mother would stay in the bedroom to rest, but I'd always go in there to hug her before I left. I never wanted to take the time I had with her for granted. Three months after my mother's diagnosis, the COVID pandemic hit. 2020 was a year full of bad timing, especially for my family. The world had come to a halt. Throughout my mother's surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, she seemed to grow weaker and weaker. Her skin seemed to be drained of its once lively color. Dark bags under her eyes began to become more apparent as weeks passed. Her long dark hair was now gone, yet that was the part I noticed the least. She explained to me and my brothers that, "in order to get rid of the bad cells, the treatment also gets rid of the good cells." I understood her explanation. I hated it.

Cancer.

Appointments… consultations… surgery… chemotherapy… radiation. Those were the order of events in my small mind. It was what I'd grown used to. I started to accept this "new normal." Even through my mother's struggle, she was still a mother; my mother. A warm, compassionate, strong, capable woman. I wanted to be there for her in any way a nine year old could be, so I would try to be just as strong; always smiling through the hard times, always doing my best, and always trying to help out in any way I could. Though our current circumstances with my mother's cancer and COVID were less than ideal, she still managed to put smiles on my face and my brothers. She always put other people before herself, even in her greatest time of need. It seemed as if happiness had managed to make its way back into our lives. My family gained routine again; as the months passed by, my mother's treatment eventually led to her being "cancer free." She had survived.

It was over. No more chemo. No more radiation. My reality was changing once again… but I knew that it could never go back to how it was before my mother's diagnosis. This journey hadn't really ended. That was what bothered me the most.

For a brief time, a subtle wave of relief, thankfulness, and happiness washed over me.

Growing up comes with gaining awareness and perspective. As years passed, I had moments where my mind would be reliving my mother's battle with cancer as well as witnessing firsthand how it changed her. Sometimes I hear her crying to my father, sometimes to herself late at night. I'd catch her looking at her reflection in the mirror with an expression that could shatter any heart. Even though her cancer was "gone," it was like it still had a hold of her. It had never really broken its grip to begin with. Her doctor had told her that they expected the cancer to resurface in five to ten years. Sometimes it felt like I was holding my breath as each year passed wondering, "Is this the year?" A battle with cancer is never over, even if you are temporarily "free" from it. It takes a mental and physical toll on the survivor as well as those surrounding them.

Sometimes I'd lie in bed, silently crying. Other times, I'd cry with my mother when we felt like our feelings were too much. I'd wonder to myself, "Why did this happen?" She'd ask out loud, "Why did this happen?" We both knew the answer.

Cancer doesn't care whether you're young or old, healthy or unhealthy.
It's indiscriminate, unpredictable, and relentless.
It doesn't wait for an invitation, it doesn't ring the doorbell, it doesn't wait patiently outside.
It barges in unannounced, it interjects itself into the conversation, and it strikes without a moment's notice.
This disease lives for the disruption of normalcy and the sensation of taking a loved one too soon.

This is my acknowledgement that cancer has weaved its way into my mother's life; acknowledgement that cancer will always have a part to play in my family. I no longer fear the future. It's coming, I know it is and there's no way to stop it. I've learned to embrace the change brought by this disease, and through the change I've gained perspective, resilience, and oddly enough, joy. I've gotten to get to know my mother as a person, seeing her at her best times, and her worst; for that, I am grateful. To me, embracing the change doesn't mean ignoring the bad that still exists, it means cherishing what you still have.

It's been six years since my mother's diagnosis and her body is still cancer free. I've gotten six more years of wisdom, love, and memories with my mother. Cancer takes away many things, but I will never let it take away the happiness of the experiences I continue to have with her.

Beyond cancer is hope.
Beyond cancer is perseverance.
Beyond cancer are people who care.
Beyond cancer are lives that are changed forever.

* * *

Learning to Carry the Anchor by Anika Grace

12th Grade, New York

When I was six years old, the aquarium felt like a new planet. Walking through the aisles holding my mothers hand, every jellyfish and stingray fluttering through the water was a source of wonder. I remember the thrill in my chest as if I were discovering it all for the first time, because I was. Years later, I returned as a camp counselor holding these other children's hands. The same exhibits looked smaller, quieter, more familiar. But I noticed something new: the excitement reflected in the wide eyes of the children I was chaperoning. I realized then that while I may have grown used to the world, they were just beginning to fall in love with it. Slowly but surely trudging through the depths of life.

The idea of exploration and possibility makes me feel grounded where others might feel lost. Wonder, for me, has always felt like home. Growing up, that sense of possibility came easily because I had security. My mom was my anchor, steady and constant, creating a safe world for me to imagine, learn, and dream. She raised me on her own as a single mother while also working with children, her compassion shaping me in countless ways. But in my freshman year of high school, that anchor wavered when she was diagnosed with cancer. For the first time, I felt the ground beneath me shift.

At first, fear was louder than wonder. I thought I would become an orphan. Sitting by her hospital bed, I felt a sharp contrast to the curiosity that used to drive me to ask endless questions at the aquarium. Her once strong hand leading me through the fish exhibits, looked more withered, see though, and thin. Instead of feeling safe to dream, I felt like everything could fall apart. I was not used to this.

Our household consists of just me, her, and my twin brother. While I sometimes envy the big, happy, loud families I see on TV and imagine what that would be like, I also love our intimate silence and quiet love. But sometimes that silence can be deafening.

In July 2022, on a gloomy summer day, I was going through my emails. I was eagerly awaiting my first year of high school and convinced myself that reading emails felt very mature and straightforward. On my phone I had my personal email account, my school one, and my mom's. When you open the app, it often defaults to "all inboxes." And there was a message that caught my eye, the subject titled in bold: "I'm so sorry."

I clicked on it and began reading a message that felt like a get better card with phrases like "praying for you" and the line "I'm sorry to hear about your diagnosis." What diagnosis? The further I scrolled, the more confused I became. In hindsight, I definitely should not have been snooping in my mom's emails, but my curiosity and worry surpassed that thought. I found another email labeled with some doctor, MD, and patient confidentiality. Oops.

I skimmed through a bunch of unknown terms. Fourteen year old me, long before my Grey's Anatomy obsession, had no idea what a mammogram was. But there was one word I did know, the infamous word that makes every person's heart drop. Tumor.

I was alone in my room, spiraling. I searched for one last email, anything that could connect the pieces. This one had attachments. Unrightfully colorful images that looked like something from an infrared camera, labeled left breast and right breast. My spiraling brain finally slowed and landed on one conclusion: breast cancer.

I remember thinking, what did I just do? I beat myself up for figuring it out, as if I had somehow caused it by discovering it. I went to Google and did what I do whenever panic hits. I researched, trying to find a solution to a problem I could not control. I read about stages, surgeries, and treatments. I thought, Oh God, I am going to have to confront my mom.

Later that night, we sat through a seemingly quiet dinner. The only sound was my brother's YouTube video playing aloud. I wondered if they could feel the tension in the air, if they could sense my anxiety. It felt too calm and silent, like there was nothing left to distract me from what I needed to say.

I almost whispered the words. "Mom, do you have cancer?"

Hearing them leave my mouth did not feel real. Maybe it was one big mistake. But any small hope disappeared when I saw her stunned expression and heard her say softly, "You weren't supposed to find out yet." After that, everything blurred. Not just from tears, but from the shock of it all. Information floated past me without landing. My brother's YouTube video faded into the background as questions and reassurances filled the room.

Months later, this was no longer just an image in an email. It was our reality. About 4 weeks after that dinner, we all went to the barber shop and watched as my mom shaved her head. She had not lost any hair yet, and my brother and I were confused as to why she was so quick to get rid of it. But now I understand. It was a way of gaining back some control, taking her hair away before the chemo could. After that I realized I had to build a similar mindset of resilience within myself. I started stepping up at home, attempting to cook, helping more, steadying myself as the anchor I had always relied on felt unsteady. Security, I learned, is not always given. Sometimes you construct it from the inside out.

Throughout it all, my mom's quiet strength amazed me. Even during chemo treatments, pumping literal poison into a hole in her neck she still insisted on asking about my day. Then even more impressive is how between surgeries, she returned to teaching preschool, pouring her energy into the children she loved and her job that supports us. Watching her, I understood that security is not the absence of hardship. It is the presence of resilience.

I admired how doctors made people feel safe and encouraged this resilience that fired deeply through my mom and myself. They understood the body, and that knowledge brought comfort. And during my mom's illness, the same curiosity that once guided me through aquariums slowly returned, my future of becoming a doctor inspired. This time it was deeper and more personal.

Science classes became more than requirements. They became ways to understand how my mom was still here. I learned CPR and first aid, steadied by the possibility that I might one day need to bring calm into chaos. Almost three years after her diagnosis, and only months after she was declared cancer free, I spent that first cancer free summer volunteering at the hospital near my school.

There, I saw families facing hard news like ours. I witnessed confusion, anger, fear, and moments of hysteria. I helped feed elderly and disabled patients who could not feed themselves. I sat beside people in pain. With the disturbing smells, the vulnerability, discomfort, none of it was easy. But it felt real and raw. It felt like I was fully stepping into the parts of life that are often hidden away. Because after I read that email my mom did not shield me from anything. Together, my small family of three moved through something that tested our limits and stripped away our illusion of safety. And yet, we remained. We rebuilt.

In addition to hospital volunteering, every summer since that first gloomy one I have worked with children who sometimes need just a little encouragement to reach for their dreams and to have their own anchor to build off of. When I hold their hands, I think about the girl I once was, looking up at jellyfish with complete wonder. I think about how fragile security can feel, and how powerful it becomes when you learn to create it yourself.

Exploration and security do not exist apart from each other. The security I once felt at home gave me the courage to ask questions. And when that security cracked, I learned how to carry it within me. Due to this experience I am now exploring what I want to be and what I want to learn. I grew up, realizing that while I am lucky to still have my mom, she will not always be there. But she has taught me how to stand on my own, how to keep learning about the hard truths and wonders of the world even when it feels unsteady.

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Cancer Doesn't Follow the Rules by Chrisel Roche

9th Grade, California

Good things happen to good people.
Bad things happen to bad people.

That was my logic. Clean. Simple. Almost comforting. If you did the work, you got the reward. If you followed the rules, you succeeded. Cause and effect. Fairness. Those were the laws of life as I understood them. And everyone knows the law is final.

But my dad is a good person.

He takes care of me, my mom, my sister, and even my dog (though he pretends he doesn't). He puts our needs before his own without hesitation, without complaint. He shows up every single time, whether it's for the big moments or the quiet ones. Simply put, my dad is good. Unquestionably, undeniably good.

So why did something so bad happen to him?

It didn't make sense. It still doesn't.

During the summer before high school, I participated in a musical. For the first time in my life, I felt unease about performing in public. The only person I could talk to about it was my dad. He understands me in a way I don't think anyone else ever fully will. He listened. He reassured me. He stood by me. He reminded me that I could handle more than I thought I could. When my play ended, relief came. For the first time in weeks, my shoulders relaxed.

My dad drove me home after my final show. We sat in the car for a moment before going inside, he stopped me before I left the car, switching off the radio. Then he turned to me and said, almost casually, "Y'know how the doctor thought I had a kidney stone? Turns out it wasn't. I have cancer."

I didn't cry.
My world didn't stop spinning.
I just sat there and looked at him. And he looked back at me. And somehow, somehow, we started laughing. Joking, even. But cancer isn't funny. None of it was a joke. My dad is a good person, so how could this possibly be happening to him?

I went back to my room and cried. I didn't tell my mom. I didn't tell anyone. But my dad knew.

I can't tell you much about the next three weeks. They blur together in my memory, like my brain decided to protect me by not holding on too tightly. Eventually, things settled into something that resembled normal – at least as normal as life can be when your dad goes to chemo every two weeks. When he comes home exhausted. When hair collects in the shower drain. When medical supplies quietly take over my parents room. It was a new kind of normal.

Our community showed up. People I had never met dropped off food, held prayer sessions, and tried to comfort my sister and me. And I appreciated it – I really did – but part of me couldn't help wondering what good any of it was. What good is food when there are tumors in my dad's body trying to kill him? What good is a trip to Great America when my dad is sick at home?

That's when the fear really set in.

We didn't even know the stage yet, but I refused to sit idle. I told myself I was smart. That if I learned enough, I could somehow control what was happening. So I did. I spent hours reading articles from the Mayo Clinic and the National Cancer Institute, teaching myself everything I could about colon cancer. I memorized terms I was never supposed to know. And eventually, I saw the statistics.

The survival rates for stage four cancer were 13-16%. 13-16 people out of 100 remained alive after 5 years.

But my dad couldn't have stage four colon cancer. That didn't make sense. He was a good person.

One night, at three in the morning, staring at a cancer handbook, I told myself that if my dad had stage four cancer, I might as well give up hope entirely.

In hindsight, that was probably one of the worst decisions I could make.

Because the night before my first day of high school – my mom told me it was stage four.

And at that moment, I would have done anything for my dad's cancer to become my own.

I didn't want to be strong. I didn't want to be brave or resilient or any of the other pretty words adults liked to hand to kids when something goes wrong. I wanted the universe to admit it made a mistake. I wanted an apology. My dad is a good person, he doesn't deserve this.

But the universe stayed silent.

High school started anyway. The bell rang. Teachers handed out assignments. People complained about homework. I learned how to sit in class and take notes while wondering if my dad was nauseous, or tired, or pretending not to be scared for my sake. I learned how to laugh at lunch and then cry in the bathroom between periods. I learned that life does not pause for grief, it just expects you to keep up.

But by some miracle, my dad continued to show up. To chemo. To work when he could. To our lives. Even when his body was failing him, his goodness didn't. He cracked jokes with nurses. He asked me about my day before I asked about his. He worried more about whether I was okay than whether the treatment was working. If cancer was supposed to punish bad people, it was doing a terrible job.

That's when my logic began to fall.

Maybe life isn't fair. Maybe it never was. Maybe goodness isn't armor and badness isn't a curse. Maybe the universe doesn't operate on rules that make sense to us, or rules that feel just, or rules that reward morality the way we want them to. Maybe there is no scoreboard keeping track of who deserves what.

And that realization was terrifying.

Because if goodness can't protect the people I love, then what can?

Honestly, I still don't have a perfect explanation. I probably never will. But I know this: my dad is still a good person. Cancer didn't change that. And if the world insists on being unfair, then the least I can do is refuse to let it make me cruel, or bitter, or numb.

Good things don't always happen to good people.
Bad things don't always happen for a reason.
But goodness still matters.
Not because it protects you
but because it's what you choose to hold onto
when everything else is out of your control.

And I know this,
because after all:
My dad is a good person.

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To Be Invincible by Rochelle Kuriakose

12th Grade, Texas

It's funny because as a human species, we all have this illusion of invincibility. It's always someone else's story, told through the friend of a friend. You never think it'll be you. That's how I used to think until I became the story being told.

It began in February 2025 with a throbbing back pain that was in my right shoulder blade. I was mindlessly scrolling on Tiktok when all of a sudden I felt as if someone had hammered something into my back. I assumed it was because of the position I was in. However, no matter what side I was on, the pain never left. Multiple nights went on like this, and when I told my parents, they said, "You just need to rest from the gym and work for a couple days."

After persistent back pain, we went to my PCP and she said that it was muscle inflammation and that I just needed to continue taking ibuprofen and tylenol. After another week of excruciating pain, I went to an orthopedic clinic and they asked the same questions and gave the same diagnosis. I cried to my sister that I was in so much pain and it felt like no one was taking me seriously, not even my parents. My father dismissed the topic of conversation or would just yell that it was the gym/work. When I went to physical therapy, I was told to "not complain about the pain if I wasn't going to do the exercise."

For weeks, the pain persisted and the exercises gave no relief. Towards the end of March, my right leg stopped working. It was as if the connection between my brain and my right foot had something blocking it. There was an appointment scheduled at a clinic and the doctor there told me that this was called "foot drop." They scheduled an MRI for the next week.

On April 1st, my mom came home from work. "Rochelle?" she called. "In here," I replied from my room. "Mummy, I can't walk at all. I almost fell at school. We had gone to the bleachers…" I began to overexplain my day at school so someone, anyone, believed me and did something.

"Okay, give me fifteen minutes to get dressed and then we'll go to the ER."

When we got there, my sister and I goof around in the wheelchair, not knowing the worst news of my life awaited us.

My blood pressure is through the roof, but I'm not showing symptoms. In the ER room, they asked me to walk for them and after seeing how I was stumbling, the doctors wanted to get an MRI.

I woke up to the sound of my mother's cries. A sound that has burned itself into my memory.

Groggy, I asked her what was wrong. While I was sleeping, the doctor came in with the MRI results and revealed that there was a tumor from T4 to T7 in my spine. It was pushing my spinal cord, which had caused the leg handicap. "Mummy, don't worry. It's most likely benign," I said, as I went back to sleep.

Later, the neurosurgeon comes in and says that it's most likely a schwannoma and nothing to worry about.

The first thing I remember after fully waking up after surgery is hearing my aunts crying on the couch. When the aunts saw I was awake, they left the room to give me privacy. Child life came in with a golden retriever who fell asleep on me. After what felt like forever, a doctor came in with a grim look on her face. The dots connected.

"Is it cancer?"

A slight nod confirms what I fear. Immediately, I started bawling my eyes out and my dad started profusely apologizing. After about a minute, I stopped and as every teenager does, I coped with humor.

"Well, at least my college essay will finally have a good topic!" The room laughs, but in the back of it all, there is a heavy grief that lay on everyone's shoulders.

When the neurosurgeon comes back in, he checks my reflexes. "Can you wiggle your toes for me?" I do what feels natural, yet I know something is off.

"Is it moving?" I ask. The silence speaks for itself. I would learn later that the neurosurgeon had told my family that I was most likely paralyzed, but for my sake, they kept it a secret.

The next two months are a blur, but routine settles in. Chemo, physical therapy, fevers, nausea, and the weekly meltdown all become the new normal. The life I had before was so far away, so distant and irrelevant to me now.

There are little milestones that mark my journey through those two months. After a week, I stand and walk on the parallel bars. The fear of failure is bad, but I push through because the fear of being crippled for the rest of my life is worse. After three weeks of my hair falling out, we decided to shave it all off. The memories of my mother oiling and braiding my hair– gone with just a quick trim.

The fact that I had cancer and a weak leg never settled in my mind. It led to nights where I would stay up, staring at the ceiling wondering about all the different outcomes. If I had come to the ER earlier, would my leg be normal? If I had faked my pain levels when I was asked by my PCP, would the cancer have been found earlier? My mind was flooded with thoughts that led me to anger and blame toward my parents and doctors. It was a constant battle in my mind as I was trying to figure out whose fault it was.

In those 58 days, the hospital became home as the nurses became familiar and my therapists became friends. I went from the parallel bars to a walker to a four-legged cane.

On May 28, I was discharged from the hospital. It was a relief to see the blue walls of my room, to take a shower in my own bathroom, and to see my precious dog again. However, that happiness was short-lived because in two weeks, we would go to Houston for brain and spine radiation.

To me, radiation was worse than chemo. We lived in a small apartment with four people stuffed into one bedroom. All at the same time, I was balancing radiation, chemotherapy, and physical therapy at the same time. I felt alone even though I was constantly surrounded by people. I was the only one going through pain while everyone around me seemed to be perfectly fine. While being in Houston, I fell into a depression where it seemed to fully hit that my life would never be the same again. All of my friends were hanging out or on vacation while I felt like I was going through torture. My skin on my head had become dark and when I looked in the mirror, I couldn't recognize the person looking back at me. Not only had the idea of invincibility been broken down, but all of my strength to fight seemed to also break. Radiation had brought me to rock bottom, and I felt like there was no getting out of it. Every day had become the same and seemed to end with crying and this horrible feeling of helplessness.

In 28 days, the radiation was over. It was quick compared to the two months of being in the hospital, but it was definitely a harder toll on my body.

After radiation, it felt like a big check off my list. It was a stressful topic considering the radiation we chose would have effects on my brain. I finished radiation in August, and from there, I had six months left of my cancer journey.

For the last six months, I had the regular emergency room admissions for fevers, nausea, and my leg was still a work in progress. Yet, my mind had changed. I was finally seeing the end of therapy and it was coming up faster than I expected it to.

On January 19th of 2026, I rang the bell. Part of my story with cancer had come to a finish. Chemotherapy was over and the relief that I was officially cancer free seemed to make all the tears worth it.

Today, I would like to say I've overcome the feelings I felt. The truth is that if I think about it, I still get angry. I still cry. I still want to shout and scream. I'm giving myself grace because those emotions won't go away overnight.

I'll never know the reason why I had to get cancer. There's a chance that no blessing I get will ever make up for cancer.

However, I do know that I'm not invincible. But I know that I have the strength to fight back.

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