



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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Not Just My Anxiety

Ever since I lost my friend to leukemia, my mind immediately thinks of the worst-case scenario: cancer. He was eleven years old. Everything happened suddenly for him. I can remember his mom walking into cheer practice for the first time after the doctors diagnosed him, her dark sunglasses to hide her tears and the sound of her crying with the other parents. I remember competing at cheerleading nationals in Virginia Beach and wearing orange shirts and bows to support him, and I remember that Tuesday when my parents waited outside of my middle school to tell me the news. His funeral was one I will never forget. I left a bracelet for him that everyone on the cheer team had so he would always have a part of us. His death makes it so nerve-wracking for me whenever someone I care for is in the hospital.

April 15th, 2019. I can feel the oxygen escaping my lungs, the burning sensation while gasping for air. The tears that should cool my red hot face are falling so rapidly they could leave skid marks. *It's just my anxiety.* Sitting alone in the dark, my body curled up, shaking. He and I have barely spoken over ten words at a time to each other lately. I know he's in the hospital; I know he's sick. *I have to find out more.* I check his private Snapchat story and he tells the viewers the doctors don't think it's his appendix anymore. A million thoughts race through my brain. *It's not his appendix anymore. I want to know what's wrong, but I don't want to bug him. He hates me enough as it is. Whatever it is, he won't trust me enough to tell me. God, what if it is cancer? If they originally thought it was the appendix, it means the problem is in the lower abdominal area. What else is there? What if it's testicular cancer? What if I'm just overthinking? What if it's just my anxiety?*

April 16th, 2019. After a measly hour of sleep, I get up and go to school like any other day. Math class, room 810. Uneventful. German classroom 608. My life changes. Most of my second-period class was the same as any other. Homework check, vocabulary quiz, classwork. However, when I tell my friend about my worries, she validates them in the most shocking way. Once I tell her I don't know what's going on, she tells me he is in surgery for testicular cancer. My heart dropped to the floor. *This can't be happening again.* A few seconds later, the bell for third period rings. My next class is concert choir. I can hardly hold myself together in the hallway. Once I step foot into the large classroom more tears start trickling down my face. I grab the bathroom pass and bolt out of the double doors. I start pacing down the hallway in circles. I couldn't stop to see his mom who works at the school because she was by his side at the hospital. She was always the person I went to when I was having anxiety attacks. Another administrator finds me in the hallway and asks me what's wrong and the only words I can force out are his name. She knew exactly what I was talking about. She hugged me and let my tears fall on her shoulder.

April 18th, 2019. A night in Cape May, New Jersey. Sitting alongside my cousin in her bedroom, my phone buzzes and I see his name appear on my screen. He sends me a Snapchat message as if nothing happened. In the picture message, I can tell he's home from Children's Hospital. He makes plans to hang out in the coming week, and I agree to see him. He brushed over the fact that he had surgery. I said nothing for the sake of him trusting the girl that told me.

June 23rd, 2019. This ended up being the first time I saw him after his surgery. He still never told me himself that he had cancer, but almost everyone at school knew, so he knew I did. My friends and I head to Walmart to get a couple of things for when we leave for Bible Camp later that day. I am so scared of getting him sicker or causing an infection that I buy a travel-size hand sanitizer and lather it all over my friends and me. This was also the first time I saw him in person since he started chemo and lost his hair. We all talked for maybe ten minutes before he had to head to the pool to meet up with his mom. I prayed for him every day at Bible camp and got some of my youth counselors to do the same.

June 27th, 2019. The morning after my friends and I get back from Bible Camp, we head to the park to see him again. After some time messing around and being stupid teenagers, I hear someone call his name. It was his mom from their backyard, which connected to the park. I ran to see her as fast as I could, even though one of my flip-flops flew off my foot and jumped over the fence to see her. I hadn't seen her since a little before his surgery and I missed her more than anything. She and I caught up, and I told her about camp, and she told me about what the past couple of months were like for her being home with him.

Having someone you love fight cancer is a traumatizing experience for everyone involved. It makes you think differently about life and the fact that it can change at any moment. Luckily, my friend who had testicular cancer caught it early and is in remission. Remember to cherish your loved ones every day.