



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School
Teen Essay Contest

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Dear Cancer

Dear Cancer,

15 years and you are still trying to close your willowy, dark fingers around me and my family. It has been 18 years since I was born, and I have become very familiar with you. You are a phantom of my past and present. I do not seek to know you in my future. I have known your ugly, scarred face for 15 years. I was three when you revealed who you were and your terrible intentions. As a toddler, I was unaware of your power. That is until my mom took it away from you. My mother was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. My three-year-old self remembers the days of strangers bringing food to the house as a surprise, and the days visiting Mom in that ivory-colored hospital, and the inexplicable phenomenon that made Mom lose all her hair. I may not know what it is like to challenge you face to face, but I sure know the collateral damage you do to families and loved ones. My little sister was one when you first visited us. Neither her nor I could explain your presence, yet we knew you were there. We knew you had hexed our mom into becoming a frail, deteriorated version of herself. Mom, only 37 at the time, looked you dead in your lifeless eyes and said no. She refused to go with you. This time you lost. Your foul decay could not compete with Mom's love, courage, and determination. The day my mom was deemed to be cancer-free years ago was the last time I would ever see you.

I am 18 and I can still remember the time you returned with a cold vengeance. Mamaw was Mom's mother. My grandmother. She was the wisest and most down-to-earth woman I ever knew. She was inspiring with her spirited smile that warmed everyone to the core. I vividly remember spending an entire summer at her house the year you decided to come back. The day my mom told me Mamaw had cancer I assumed it would be the same. Mamaw would fight until you gave up and then she would regain her strength and we would all move on. Wishful thinking

on my part. You came back with an anger unlike any other. The day Mom evaded your filthy grasp was the day you began your plot. You were so enraged you couldn't have her, so you came for Mamaw. You imbedded your insectile body in my grandmother's colon and refused to leave. As the summer at Mamaw's came to an end, I knew something wasn't right. I approached her to give her a farewell hug. Mamaw was now skeletal and pale. I remember feeling like I was hugging thin air. Her boney fingers lightly rested on my back in the embrace. And just like that, my family drove home. That was the last time I saw her before you took her in your captivity. Mamaw passed away a few months after we were with her. We were all devastated. You are a parasitic phantom of hate and sorrow. You thrive in these moments of grief. I was in third grade when you took Mamaw from us. You're ruthless.

I'd like to say that you had your "fun" and that you were done meddling with my life, but you weren't. I didn't know you would strike at my mom again. Last year, she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. That's when I found out how ugly you really are. You rooted yourself within Mom and you are not letting go. Every person I have talked to has been affected by your evil. Your daunting figure looms everywhere. I am only 18 years old. I am just about to start a new era in my life and I for once and for all want you out of it. Your reign of terror is limited now. I could continue on and say all the negative ways you have impacted my life and the lives of others, but I think you deserve at least a little credit. You have put us humans to the test. You're a tribulation that we are overcoming. You haven't taught me sadness. You haven't taught me fear. You, Cancer, have taught me to love. Love is stronger than fear and it is the fuel that drives us to do amazing things. Love conquers all. You cower in the presence of love. Love pushes scientists to find a cure, pushes people to race for cures, pushes people to invest in so much to stop you. I am 18 and you have taught me to love with such a ferocity that I will never stop fighting to put an end to you. I refuse to allow you to victimize any more precious lives. You can have my past, you can have my present, but you will certainly not be in my future.

Sincerely,

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