



2020 Ben Strauss Youth Program High School Teen Essay Contest

My Ly

Let Us

Let us shatter the societal divide between ourselves as strangers to one another, and connect upon our one shared vulnerability: mortality. These bodies, these biological beings, can be whisked away just as powerfully as they dawned. So compelling, so captivating, are the fleeting moments we have breathing before possibly diving into the infamous eternal unconsciousness— to each their own. Oftentimes, unless thwacked by immediate danger, the present peace makes our unavoidable fate seem so distant... so *theoretical*. Introducing itself in the form of lung cancer, my encounter with death— or rather, the idea of it— roots back to the life I have led in the past, an innermost history unbeknownst to the world until now.

Let us take a journey down my memory lane to a place seas away: Hung Lợi, Vietnam. Situated far down south where agriculture is predominant, my hometown is surrounded by vast rice paddies that, during every harvest season, settle upon the landscape a breathtaking golden hue. Along the dirt roads leading to the countryside, settlements quickly downlink from tin

ceilings and cement palisades to thatch roofs and mud walls. These cultural imprints, despite their authentic beauty, reveal a major detail: Hung Lôi is indigent and behindhand.

The lack of education this small town has to offer resulted in generations of people corroding their health with nicotine addiction, a cheap thrill. Growing up, I was always out and about with my grandfather or uncles, which taught me many things about our way of life. Yet, the more my mind immersed in new knowledge from being outside, the more my young lungs drowned in carcinogens overmastering the air. Cigarette smoke carries many of the same toxins as the cigarette itself (“Health Effects”). Inhaling that smoke spurs a phenomenon called secondhand smoking, and often causes health problems such as coronary heart disease, middle ear disease, respiratory infection, and *lung cancer*.

Fortunately for me, my lungs’ damages were detected early when emigrating to the United States. However, not everyone is as fortunate. My grandfather descends from a long line of substance abusers. Thus, the addiction in his genes chained him like a prisoner; two packs of cigarettes a day for roughly 20 years. Little did he know, this source of euphoria will come crashing down as his worst nightmare in 2009.

Just like the Machiavellian legacy of the Trojan Horse in the fall of Troy, carcinogens residing in cigarettes enter the body to mutilate cells lining the lungs (“Lung”). After years of damage, my grandfather developed cancer in his left lung. My family soon faced the disease’s fearsome capabilities from my grandfather’s estimated life expectancy: six months.

The diagnosis dropped on our family so suddenly, crashing onto our mundane lives as we rushed to get him treated. Unlike in the United States, health insurance in Vietnam is not as common or accessible, especially for those in rural areas (“Healthcare”). For his treatments, paying thousands of dollars out-of-pocket was our critical issue. Within that year, everyone in

the family exerted drastic efforts to squeeze out money by selling their possessions, applying for additional jobs, taking loans, and even begging for donations. While I, left in the dark from affairs of the adult world, stole toys from our shop when no one was watching.

With my grandfather spending most of his time in *Sài Gòn* to see the doctors and my family members turning into workaholics, 2009 was perhaps the most forlorn year of my childhood. Distanced from my mother at night as she stayed up praying for her father, I slept alone and very little from the phantasm of demons lurking in the dark. During the daytime, seeing so many worn out faces amid this confusing chaos altered my perceptions of home and school. School and its strenuous workload surprisingly became a comfort, distracting my thoughts from the baffling changes at home. Walking home after school was a delightful asset of my day because my grandfather would always wait at the gate with snacks and fun stories. Walking home alone while he was away became something I dread, knowing that the road only leads to a place muddled with unanswered questions. I hated living in a culture so heavily impacted by censorship, feeling overwhelmed and helpless by the lack of knowledge while everyone else seems to *know* and have the power to act. It feels as though suppressing news from young children in the family and avoiding the elephant in the room at dinner was my family's way of coping, of avoidance. Most, if not all, of the insights I have regarding the situation were overheard from private conversations. Reflecting on everything now, I believe that my mindset and behavior would have been better if my family took the time to explain. In fact, there is one thing I will always regret doing...

It was another excruciatingly humid day in Hung Lợi due to the seasonal monsoon; an air so thick it was sliceable with a knife. My grandfather came back from the hospital in *Sài Gòn* earlier that morning, wearing a seamed cap down to the tip of his earlobes. It was a bizarre sight,

rarely anyone in this weather wears an extra layer. On rare occasions, I would catch glimpses of his bare head, only to see scattered bald spots as if the barber was intoxicated. However, this was not the work of any barber. Since chemotherapy targets fast-growing cells to slow down cancer, that black list also includes healthy cells such as hair follicles (“Chemotherapy”). I wish I had known this at the time, because my grandfather’s hair loss was all Greek to me. Given that no one in the family dared to speak of his appearance, I pried for an answer from the man himself.

“Ủa,” I inquired, “sao cõn nhìn thấy ghê vậy?” *Why do you look so hideous?*

To this, if my grandfather had any emotions enkindling within, he sure did not reveal much without. Our time together gradually shortened partially due to his depleting agility, and, perhaps partially due to empathy— an empathy towards me. He knew I was scared and ashamed of him, of his patchy hair, of his jittery hands, of his sunken eyes, of his slumped gait. It was not until later on that I realized, *shame* is hiding behind my mother; *shame* is avoiding his eyes; *shame* is running away from him. In doing those things to someone so dear, especially during his most vulnerable time, *shame* is *me*.

In the ever flowing motion of time, as my eyes are beginning to open, his are beginning to close. Lung cancer serves as a disturber of peace, not only for him but for those whose world he takes part in. Against all odds and the six-month deadline, my grandfather’s conditions eventually began to improve. Our goodbyes, however, could not be avoided. Shortly after, my emigration papers were approved and I was off to the United States with my mother.

Despite the 8, 995 miles gap from Hung Lõi, it is quite amusing how history can repeat itself; the step-dad who I had moved in with is a cloud of smoke. Ingrained in my memory are the white fumes that enwreathes him on the daily, leaving a residue on everything and anything nearby with its nauseous odor. Cancer crept into my life once again, presenting itself as nostalgic

scenes I am all too familiar with. As though life is a movie, parts of the childhood I left behind were re-enacted by my dear younger sister and her father.

Unlike before, I was now older and more informed. But, do I have the power to act on that knowledge?

Yes.

Amongst a million other reasons, the love for my sister— whose life barely started— slowly but surely empowered my mother and me to pack our bags and deter her, as well as ourselves, away from the road once travelled.

Let us reflect upon the tragedies in our lives and the insights they may bring. The smell of cigarettes disgusts me, arousing miserable memories from times not too long ago. Hence, witnessing the deadly consequences of smoking reduced my risk factors for lung cancer— it is a mindset vaccine in a way.

Let us find the virtue in the vulgar. Through the power of lung cancer, peace regained its importance and appreciation in my life. Likewise, diseases are an important reminder of our finite time here in this world, in these transient bodies.

Let us find and fulfill our stay here on Earth with a meaning and purpose that speaks to our souls.

Let us come together from our disturbers of peace, our obstacles in the road of life.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Let us.

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