2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

**3rd Place Winner**

Gavin Chess

Departure: My Reflection

I am a new person. Much different from the “me” that existed 7 years ago. What separates us are many things, most importantly, the experiences. Back then I had an enemy. And although it wasn’t my battle to fight- I suffered the aftermath. The battle belonged to my father. His name was Gregory, most called him Greg, his friends called him “Har”, his patients, doctor. But to me he was my dad.

 I cannot explain the void in your heart when you lose someone you love. What concepts warp your brain and torment your soul. The principle that they are gone forever, never to speak again, laugh again, love again. That was the hardest thing for me. Accepting. Accepting that he was gone and never coming back, no matter how many times I beseeched the Lord for him. Why was it him? Why did he have to get so unlucky? Why was it us? My family. Yes, my family, sad broken mourners. It was us that had paid for the sciences at the end of nature’s spear. ‘What are the odds?’ I ask myself. And yet I still do not know.

 The house had lost a voice after we had lost him. However, it didn’t phase me much. His presence here had been minimal during treatment, our very home, safe haven to him. The living room is quiet, no more nightly TV with Dad, the bed is empty, my mother rests next to a cold pillow.

 My memory of the hospital is vague but clear, soft but strong, sad but happy. I didn’t know much about my dad’s battle back then other than the fact it was against cancer. Now my current self knows more. Multiple Myeloma, a blood cancer. Simple on paper, but oh the horrors it brought to reality. A rare blood cancer that crafts cancerous plasma cells in marrow which weakens the bones, kidneys, and immune system. This truly devious thing that so desperately sucked the life out of him. Ribs always breaking, constantly at the hospital, continuous treatment, and pain. O’ so much pain I cannot even fathom it. All of this and even more to receive no complaints from him. Instead, he showered us with love, energy, laughter, and morals. So much taken from him, only to give more, what a selfless soul so genuinely put on this Earth. There were moments of celebration, sadness, triumph, stress, and happiness in the walls of his room there at the hospital. The hospital, it left me with a strange feeling. I still cannot find the words to describe that building’s impact on me, but I know it changed all of us, no matter how hard my family tried to maintain “normalcy”. It was hard to see him in pain, someone you care so much about but incapable of assisting. My mom says he hated us seeing him sick, but it was then he was most vulnerable, then that I could connect with him. Those days, there in the hospital, seemed to be the worst for my father I assume, but for the rest of us the pain came after.

 I remember vividly we were on a car ride home from the hospital one night. We had pulled into the garage and headed inside to unpack and take off our shoes. Summarily after doing so my mom pulled us into the living room, sat us down, and prepared. She is a woman of many words but only spoke few then. I cannot recite it word for word but what she told us next I remember like this… “Guys, I need to tell you something. Daddy is going to die.” That moment right there, yes, that one, it was the one that paralyzed my universe forever, strained my soul, devoured my innocence. The tears and the hugs went hand in hand. The energy that resonated within the three of us that night, my brother, mom, and I, still resonates from within us today. That night we created a bond that will never be broken, because what bonded us was our brokenness. I do not wish for anyone to experience the sadness that enveloped us that evening, because it is the most terrible thing I have ever felt. It is the hardest I’ve ever cried, most shattered I’d ever been. If seven-year-old me had ever been sad before, it was unmatched to the feeling that radiated through me then. Some say they cry until there are no tears left, till they’re sick, or satisfied. But that day I cried, I cried not until there were no tears left to cry, but until the life in me had vanished.

 The years after came rockily but we got through. What I had lost seemed like an asset now, one I didn’t have, one I thought I’d be judged for. It made me feel different that I did not have a dad, it made me angry. You may think it seems selfish that I felt this way and I can agree completely. I have lived with the guilt of this for half of my life and now I am opening up. I don’t talk about him much, the events that ensued then, or my feelings and thoughts, but this is my opportunity. I am coming clean, no more hiding, no more burdens, no more secrets. This is my life. This is my family. I had a father. It has been hard for me to accept that so many have the thing I don’t, but I have taught myself that everyone is fighting their battles, everyone loses something, and everyone learns. I believe these experiences have made me the person I am today and although I lost so much during that time, I also rebuilt myself. The sense of relief I feel as I type each word of this essay is reprieving, and I thank myself for it.

 Cancer is a bitch, there is no doubt. It destroyed my life and folded it into a million paper cranes, each harboring their own challenge. But I recovered. We recover. And I ask that you pause to appreciate every aspect of life because I know it in all its value and beauty. And most definitely I know my dad did.