2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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The “C” Word

He has CANCER. There it was. The “word” some people whisper in polite circles. The word that makes some people look at you and wince, or grimace, or furrow their eyebrows and stare at you harder to see if they can read into your forehead with their x-ray feelings-reading eye balls, while other people throw the same word around so casually as if it’s just another thing that may be on the lunch menu that Wednesday that no one will choose, like canned peaches or cottage cheese.

Hearing the news was not quite like being hit by a ton of bricks, or a slap in the face, but more like a dream where you try to run and shout for help, but your legs are stuck, and no sound comes out of your mouth. You tell your brain not to panic but your body betrays you. Your heart starts beating in your throat from the back of your chest while you silently commanding the tears you can feel welling up in your eyes to STOP. The tip of your nose begins to burn a little, “just don’t freak out,” you tell yourself “It’s probably fine, don’t be stupid.”

I distinctly remember making the decision to swallow the lump that was ballooning out of nowhere in the back of my throat and not making eye contact when my mom called me into her room from the hall where she didn’t know I was listening. She asked me to put my phone down so she could talk to me and as you might imagine I had to tell her I couldn’t because “I was in the middle of a really important game.” Queen-Show-Some-Respect-Young-Man-And-Look-At-Me-When-I’m-Speaking-To-You either did not even notice that I kept my eyes on my phone or she was too preoccupied to care. “I have some news about Papou,” she said.

Then she just did it, I must admit, like an Olympic Athlete. It was remarkable really, as though she was the gold medalist of multi-tasking and emotional compartmentalizing. She took one last gulp of air before heading under water for a long-synchronized swimming routine. “It’s cancer, and I’m catching the first flight possible once I get a covid test and be there in the next 72 hours because those are the new customs rules to get into Canada. Please take care of your brother and keep your room clean and get your work done because this is an important year, don’t throw college out the window just because I’m not going to be here to check on you, you’re going to have to get yourself up and make sure you eat before school and make yourself dinner if dad isn’t home and make sure your brother has food and get him his medication and he has his g-tube feeds and help him with his homework, and for heaven’s sake, do not fight and let him hang out with you, oh, and please pray for Papou and call once in a while to say hello, and oh, and I love you very much.” She came up for a breath.

She just threw-up a cancer “to-do” instruction list for me while casually dropping that she was taking an indefinite one-way ticket out of the country in the next two to three days, and all I could muster was “ok” and that was it. WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

Cancer is one of those things we have talked about up close and from afar a million times, but this was different. Less cerebral. I knew my mom had her own cancer struggles. I have seen her scars, but we don’t really talk about it. The first six years of my brother’s life I only got to see her when I visited them in the hospital because of his rare condition. We lived in a state of perpetual “it could be any day now,” anxiety until he passed his life expectancy, but no one is over it. Spending all those years in a hospital with smiling balding kids wearing knit hats and hospital gowns wheeling around their own IV poles like professional figure skaters or ballroom dancers with their partners is kind of a strange thing to be so comfortable with at sixteen. My family is abnormally familiar with illness. I have been to so many funerals and seen so much sadness and death up close that I feel like a junior undertaker. This time, however, feels different.

My grandfather is a giant. I am his first grandchild and his first namesake, and just like the “BIG FAT” movie, he is every bit the Greek stereo type without the Windex. He talks incessantly in parables and metaphors and perpetually tells anyone and everyone who will listen why the etymology of a word or anything good or great “comes from the Greek (fill in the blank).” Suddenly, I want to rewind time and take back every time I said to myself “here we go again” as I rolled my eyes listening to Papou tell me, “You know, you should be proud of who you are, the Greeks started democracy, and the word democracy comes from two Greek words…”

I’m sorry. I want to take in every word and memorize the sound of his voice and the shape of his big hands that he waves around while he talks, and stare at his ample yet defiant eyebrows. When he isn’t lecturing me on how proud I should be of my heritage he is writing me long letters filled with love and stories and reminding me that I have someone who is so proud of everything I do that I feel so important and special.

I didn’t even have time to process what was happening and the Olympian had her bags packed. The phone was attached to her ear for two straight days and fridge and freezer were miraculously stocked with enough food for a family of ten to survive indefinitely in an underground post-nuclear survival bunker. Then she casually announced she was taking the dog because she thought he would be “good for Papou.” Great, she’s taking the dog too. What’s next?

That is when I got angry. Maybe my reaction wasn’t cool but nothing about this is *cool*. I have not seen any of my grandparents, except maybe up their nostrils or part of a forehead and their ceilings on a facetime call over the past couple of years because they can’t figure out technology and Covid-19 and money keep us from visiting. It’s been five years since we were together in person. The last time I saw my Papou I still had buck teeth and the voice of Vienna choir boy and now I’m almost six feet tall. This isn’t fair.

“It’s just a little bump,” Papou said when I called pretending to be cheerful and distract him with good news of my grades. Typical. I knew that it had metastasized into two grapefruits playing footie in his forearm, and the doctors said at best, he would lose his right arm. LITERALLY HIS RIGHT ARM. That will never just be an expression to me anymore. “Hi! Meet Jim, he’s the operational assistant and my right arm.” No! Who believes that losing your right arm at eighty-eight is a best-case scenario?

I’m sure Papou’s wondering if someone will have to feed him now or help him with the bathroom and drive him around. Did he just lose all his dignity in one doctor’s visit? He jokes in Greek, “You know, I was perfectly healthy until I went to the doctor, and they made me a sick man. You should never see a doctor.” I faked a laugh and my mind wandered and wondered if I would ever get one of those letters he used to write in the mail ever again. I’m so selfish. Where did I put those letters?

Wait! Worst case scenario? Only a few months? Covid-19 won’t let me into the country to kiss him good-bye and tell him with a hug how I feel so I don’t have to put it into words. My head is spinning now so maybe I should just play a video game and pretend it isn’t happening. I really don’t want to talk about it, with anyone. Mind your own business.

To the Undifferentiated Pleomorphic Sarcoma that is pillaging my grandfather’s body I’ll say this: you are unwelcome. You are a thief and villain. You’ve done enough damage, and I haven’t even started to process this. I’m numb. But when I come up with the right words for you, I’m warning you, they won’t be nice.