2022 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

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The Phone Call

Click-clack. My fingers dance across my black laptop’s keyboard. As I think of what to write next, there is a long silence. Suddenly, there is a loud cry that rings through my ears. I didn’t know at the time, but our lives are about to change forever.

My mom hangs up the phone and runs to the bedroom, a waterfall of tears streams down her face. My family is quickly concerned and fearing the worst. *What has happened? Did someone die? What could cause my mom to react that way?* We all run over to her, but my dad gets to her first and shuts the bedroom door. We press our ears against the door, eavesdropping to hear what my parents are discussing. I peek through the crack of the door to see my dad comforting my mom by wrapping his arms around her. I can see his lips moving as if whispering comfort to her.

That night my parents never come out of their room. As the oldest sibling, I take initiative to put my siblings to bed in my parents’ absence. I blow my brother and sister goodnight kisses and quietly exit their room. Despite my concern, I choose not to disturb my parents and put myself to bed, still without knowing what caused this drama. I flick the light switch, generating black darkness to surround my small abode. I plop down on my plushy, gray bed causing the springs to bounce up and down and squeak like a mouse. As I lay in bed with endless uncomfortable thoughts racing through my mind, I want to knock on the adjacent wall to ask what is wrong.

Through the air vent in my room, I can hear my mom question, “What if everything will not be okay though, Jeff?!”

“Everything will be, everything will be okay,” I listen to my dad console her. I could tell he wanted to seem strong, but I could hear his voice cracking from sadness. Hearing my parents so sad stuns me, as I realize I have never seen them so upset before. It worries me deeply.

The wind whips at my window raging like an angry baby. A new day has dawned, but I still feel like I’m in the dark. Thunder crackles in the sky as if the gods are sending me a message. *Today is going to be depressing.* I walk out of my room spotting my mom waving me into the office. My parents sit my brother, sister, and I down.

My mom inhales a deep breath of air and speaks softly, “Bubba has cancer,” she frowns, looking at the floor. “The type of cancer he has is called Acute Myeloid Leukemia.”

“To put it in the simplest terms, it is a cancer of the blood and bone marrow,” my dad explains.

With tears rushing to her eyes, my mom adds, “Sadly, it is a quickly progressing

malignant disease where there is an excessive amount of irregular white blood cells.”

As she speaks, I feel a massive pit drop into my stomach. It’s cold and heavy. The world around me gets dark and narrow. The words repeat in slow motion, *Bubba has cancer. Bubba has cancer. Bubba has cancer.* I am in an eternal nightmare spinning in a dark room with these words echoing against the walls. This new reality is knocking at the door, but I refuse to let it in.

I come back to life when she reassures, “I know this is hard to hear, but we can hope everything will be okay.” My mom explains there are treatments, but they are risky and it will be a long, rough process.

Those involuntary feelings continue to rattle in the back of my mind for the next six months after my grandpa’s diagnosis. It was the first day of school and I was ready to begin my freshman year. From Pre-K through 8th grade, my mom had never missed sending us off to school until today. I then recall why she is gone. Emotions rush back to me, filling my eyes with tears, recalling the worst moment of my life. As scared as I am, I am also positive because my mom was donating her stem cells, so my grandpa had a chance to live. I’m so excited that we have finally found a good donor for him. Her chair faces the table, but it is empty. Dinner feels strange that night. “What’s mommy doing?” my little brother asks.

My dad tries explaining it in a way a six-year-old would understand, “It’s called a Stem Cell Transplant. First, they take some of mommy’s blood and collect her platelets and white blood cells. Then, they use her healthy white blood cells to give to Bubba.”

My brother wrinkles his nose, confused. The first week of school all I can think of are the uncomfortable treatments she was going through.

Although my grandpa is my hero, he is not Superman. The Bubba I know is brave, funny, and gives unconditional love. I know he is strong, but the odds were against him. The 26% chance of survival for his condition frightens and saddens me. It hit me like a bullet piercing my flesh, realizing that he may not be with us forever. I remember all the good times we shared: the funny grandpa jokes he told me, swimming in the pool and having epic water gun battles and making Tik Toks where he cluelessly danced along just to make me laugh. I wished we could keep making these memories for a lifetime.

This moment popped the protective bubble that surrounded my childhood. It felt like my innocence was stripped from me. I suddenly found myself drowning in the fears of the real world. Throughout the journey of my grandpa kicking cancer’s butt, I learned that family can get you through anything. It gave me comfort knowing that I was not alone. My family and I would be standing together the whole time supporting each other.