A close-up of a sign

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**2024 Ben Straus High School Teen Essay Contest**

**1st Place Winner**

**Carmen Bonner**

**The First Day of School**

On my first day of school, junior year, I wore a dress. Light blue, like a pale blueberry sort of color. It was decorated with white flowers, so I selected a gold necklace with dainty green flowers to match. My friend brought it back for me from a school trip to Italy. I also found the perfect shorts to wear; they were the right shade of blue and short enough so they wouldn’t extend past the hem of my dress. I needed shorts since I would be sitting down all day. I would not get the chance to stand up at all, and I wasn’t able to cross my legs. On my first day of school, junior year, I wore a dress, and I entered in a wheelchair.

My spine, slick with sweat, stuck to the back of my chair as my mom wheeled me up the ramp. We were late, since I couldn’t imagine myself navigating the throngs of people already there. My sister, a freshman on her first day, happened to be taking a tour with her class as I entered. We waved down the main hall and quickly snapped a picture of each other, laughing. The picture she took of me is ingrained in my memory. My bald head shined brighter than the floors, like a reflective egg. I looked small in the chair, smaller than I should. I didn’t look like me.

I signed in, said goodbye to my mom and wheeled into the cafeteria, securing a spot before it filled with people. We had planned my arrival so I would arrive just before lunch. The bell rang, and the more students that came in, the more I hunched over my phone. The last time these people had seen me, they’d seen me at eye level. Walking, standing. The last time most of them had seen me, I had hair. My thoughts strayed to my mother. Was she okay leaving me here? Is she going to be alright knowing I’ll be on my own? We’d barely been apart for months; I knew she grew anxious about being separated. I hated that she had to worry about me. I hated that anyone had to.

When my friends began to sit down beside me, though, these thoughts dissipated. They talked about their classes so far, lamented the end of summer, and compared schedules. The normalcy of it all was a sweet oasis, but the Ziploc bag holding three pills in my lunchbox reminded me of my abnormality.

“Time to take my drugs,” I joked, pulling out my pain medication. My friends laughed. This was my cure—joking about all I had to go through, not to make light of it, but rather, to convince myself that everything would be okay.

In third period, after lunch, I had sculpture 3D art. I’d had the teacher before and loved her. She helped me maneuver my wheelchair to a good spot at a table, where four other girls and I played a “get to know me” game. The game was strange, and the questions were deeper than typical icebreaker questions. One asked about goals for the year, to which I answered something along the lines of beating cancer and finishing chemotherapy. My face grew hot as I said the words. I’d always felt weird talking seriously about what was happening to me. I didn’t want anyone’s pity. But even at that art table, red-faced and embarrassed, I knew how stupid that was. I knew that the girls there, along with everyone else in my life, merely cared and wanted me to get better. I wanted to, too, but there’s this persistent guilt that comes with people caring about me.

I had biology next. The teacher, a passionate older woman with a thick accent, kicked off her lesson by asking us what the most researched disease was. Other students guessed things like COVID-19 and the flu. Her exasperation grew with each wrong answer, but I knew exactly what she was looking for the moment her gaze fixated on me. I felt that familiar heat creeping over my head again.

“Cancer,” I answered with an awkward smile.

I sat in that biology class, in the cafeteria, in art, in the elevator, in my wheelchair, five days after surgery with a five-inch incision in my thigh, and that was all I wanted. I wore a dress and laughed with my friends. I reconnected with an old teacher and met a new one. I was going to be at school whenever I could, even if it meant wheeling around. Even if it meant packing Ibuprofen & Tylenol for the pain. Even if my mother would worry about me. Even if I was bald and everyone could see my whole head turn red. I was going to be a normal high school student on my first day of junior year and every single day after that.