A close-up of a sign

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

**Honorable Mention**

**Emily Spence**

**Hummingbird**

Sitting there with my mom, I looked around the dense forest filled with many different birds and unspoken words. We sat on a bench covered in beautiful red flowers, overlooking the pristine image of an everlasting lake. The crisp air left me with a red nose and my fingers reaching for the ends of my sleeves.

The idea of chemo treatments and all sorts of medical terms ran through my mind as I sat there and breathed the clear air. How come health is not promised, but death is? The surrounding atmosphere fills me with more and more questions as I'm alone with my thoughts. Is it selfish to ask my mom questions about what her doctors say? Everyone else was already pressing her for answers.

As we sit in silence, I see her body turn slightly away from the beautiful views. She faces me and just sits for a moment. She seems to have something to say, but it is hard for her to conjure up the words. Once she gathers the courage, she asks the question that we were both thinking but never said out loud.

“Em, am I going to be okay?” my mom said as she looked at my red nose and teary eyes.

No, no, no, no.

Don’t ask me that. Not right now. Not right here. Just please keep sitting here in silence. While the silence of the woods forced my mind to spiral about my mom's hospitalization, there was some solace in not knowing the answer. Because if the answer to my mom's question was no, then all my fears wouldn't just be fears, they would be the truth. If the answer remained a mystery, it provided me with a glimpse of hope. When I was alone with my thoughts, the reality was not solid, when said out loud, it became real.

When a loved one is sick, we make attempts to push back the idea of their passing, the idea of them suffering, and sometimes, the idea that the disease is even there to begin with. The best way to cope with something difficult is to not cope at all. Rather, it’s easier to pretend reality is just a morbid fantasy.

This time though, she said the words. She asked the question. I have to think of the best way to respond, not only for my mom, so she feels secure and comforted, but for myself as well. The world starts to spin as the question echoes itself over and over again in my head. Am I supposed to say yes, or be more realistic? Stage four breast cancer is not something that guarantees another day, nor leaves room for any hope. So I gave her the best, most honest response I could.

“Mom, I don’t know,” I mumble with a single tear running down my cheek.

There it is, the truth.

We sit in silence as we both think about my answer. Neither of us knows how to continue.

Shrouded with an uncomfortable gravity, suddenly a fast and small creature flew by. It had beautiful colors that flashed before my eyes as it spiraled through the chilly air.

In the blink of an eye, a hummingbird drops down to just a few feet away from us. I watch it fly to the red flowers of the bench and hover above its wood framing. What a strange thing to see, hummingbirds are never around here this time of year. A small part of me starts to feel a sense of comfort. I start to feel like it's a sign.

“You know Mom, hummingbirds are a sign of hope; it’s pretty rare to see one this time of year. It has to mean something.”

That is when I found the answer to my mom’s question. The answer to almost every problem in our lives: hope. Hope in the form of a hummingbird. Convincing myself that my mom’s health is dependent on a bird may seem crazy, but so is life. If I was only focused on the “I don’t know,” and “you only have 5 years left,” why would hope even exist?

Hope is what gives us life. You hope that your math test will go well, or your four-hour shift will be quick. You hope that your dog didn't go through your trash can while you were at school and that your family is healthy. Hope is around every second of the day, even if we don't know it.

No one is promised another day. We can’t control it. But we can control how we see every day.

Three years, a brain tumor, and several rounds of chemo later, hope is still here. Hope is what we allow to run our lives, not fear. Hummingbirds still fly in front of me as I watch the lake ripple in the rain.

Hope is found anywhere you look, even in the form of a hummingbird.