



CANCER SUPPORT
COMMUNITY
GREATER PHILADELPHIA

2024 Ben Straus Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

2nd Place Winner

Julia LaBoy

The Unknown

I am afraid of the dark.

Well, at least I *used* to be.

As a young child, the idea of sitting alone in the dark instilled a bazaar fear into my little mind. For hours, I would lie awake in bed petrified, praying that the warm fuzzy blanket over my head would save me from the imaginary monsters.

Yet, as I grow older, I realize that this hindering fear of the dark is more far more complex than I originally presumed. It is not the literal lack of light which frightens me, but rather the uneasy thought of being abandoned in the unknown.

Of course, I did not learn this fact about myself overnight. It took me *years* to realize my supposed fear of the dark was actually translated to my fear of the unknown. In fact, it took me up until my freshman year of high school to reach this understanding.

When I newly turned fifteen, my father died of stage four bladder cancer. As if the divorce was not enough, I had been weighed down by yet another burden.

For a year and a half, I knew that my dad was gravely suffering. I knew that his chemotherapy treatment was stronger than others because of his young age and active lifestyle. I knew that I was forbidden from leaving the house during the pandemic to avoid contracting even the slightest of illnesses that could be easily contracted by my susceptible father. I knew that he barely slept at night due to the pain he was in. I knew that he lost so much weight that laughing could (and did) crack a rib. But that was about *all* I knew.

Because the knowledge regarding my father was so limited and every adult in my life left me in the dark, I took matters into my own hands. I transformed into my own source of light, caught in a loophole of researching and asking questions with no straight answer. *Google* was probably irritated by my repetitiveness, as each day my search engine looked like the following:

Side effects of chemotherapy?

What is a neobladder?

Life expectancy for stage four bladder cancer?

Is there a cure for cancer yet?

Even as a high schooler, I felt like I was my little old self, back under the covers in a panicked, gut-wrenching sweat. This time, instead of fearing the unknown corners of my dark room, I feared the unknown condition of my father. Truly, I was *so* out of the loop. I was fifteen, but apparently not old enough to know the state of my dad's health. My mind created monsters to fill the gaps of my father's uncertain condition, blurring the lines between reality and this created phenomenon. I pulled the covers over my head, wishing that the blankets would make everything disappear.

As time progressed, my father's health worsened, but my knowledge remained unchanged. No one told me how many emergency surgeries were to come, or that the aggressive chemotherapy would tear my dad away from me. Hair loss, weight loss, personality change...the man I once viewed as my hero was decaying in front of my eyes. No one told me that by the time he was diagnosed, his chances of life were already slim. I was too hopeful; I didn't know. No one told me that when I packed his bag to the hospital on my birthday weekend, it would be my last normal interaction with him. I reluctantly tossed a couple of shorts and shirts into his suitcase, not knowing that the next time I visited his house, he would be half-conscious and heavily medicated on a hospital bed connected to a noisy oxygen tank.

You see, I never really feared the dark. I feared the knowledge that I lacked, watching as my dad faded away into the darkness. I feared for his life, yet had no way of knowing what came next due to the lack of information I was provided.

As an aspiring pediatrics nurse, I hope to make sure that no other child is deceived by this darkness, or left out of the loop. I hope to educate families on *all* of the details, so they too are not left hiding under their blankets, being blissfully unaware of the reality to come. Everyone deserves a right to know what lies in the dark, even if the truth is hard to hear.

So yes, maybe I still do run up the stairs after I turn off the lights, but at least I know it is not the darkness itself that I fear. It is the fear of the unknown, and what lies behind that very darkness.