A close-up of a sign

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

**Mannat Arora**

**His Last Chapter**

Parents. For 15 years I grew up with 2. Now, I will be able to support just one.

2020 left people in terror as a new virus had taken place all over the world. As soon as schools were put in lockdown, my dad's doctor confirmed his diagnosis. Stage four colon cancer. I was in 7th grade, and I saw my mom with her face red, her eyes puffy, and my dad with no emotion. At that point, I never realized how much that look on his face had meant. During that year, my brother wasn’t mature enough to understand the situation and my sister couldn’t even run properly. As we lived in a one-bedroom basement in New York, my dad realized we needed a bigger home. And in 2021, we moved to Philadelphia in our new house. From there, time flew. My mom had to work 3-5 and I took care of my siblings and my dad. I worked hard, made him tea, and we used to talk till 3 AM. Whenever he would give me advice, I would try to write it down on a document, as I knew this time wouldn’t last forever, and I had to share his advice with my younger siblings.

On January 17, at 10 PM my mom decided it was time to take him to the hospital. She already knew in June that he had six months left. When the oncologist told us that, she was crushed and begged the doctor to save him. My home became a mournful house and I started to count the days. Time was ticking and I realized what each moment was worth. Every chance I had, I tried to visit him in the hospital. When I woke up on the 21st, the first words I heard were “He passed away.” After he passed away, I realized how important it is to have a father figure in your life. I saw how drained I was, and how my mother was emotionless. I couldn’t make tea, or do my chores. I felt useless, but I just couldn’t touch the teapot. That was something I did just for him. Others told me about how their parents meant so much, and at the same time, I could speak so little. I felt the words “I’m sorry for your loss” tear me apart and hit me like bullets. I never wanted to talk about his death. Father’s Day would never be the same. Others would be laughing while I would sit there and ponder my thoughts. I will be going to prom soon. I always wondered if I had a date, would my dad be protective over me? Who do I look up to now? When I graduate college, who would I put my cap and gown on? As these thoughts linger in my mind, I know I have to stay strong for my father. My dad always told me that I was his pride. Now it was up to me to keep his head high.

There is a prejudice in my culture, that if I become successful, everyone will give credit to my dad, however, if I fail, they will blame my mother for my upbringing. I just desperately want to prove everyone wrong. I want to succeed and make my mom proud. His death anniversary recently passed, I couldn’t believe it was a year already. As I wear his clothes, and hear people utter the words “It’s okay.” It’s not. I don’t think people understand how someone’s just gone, they're gone but everything’s still the same, their stuff, their phone. How there’s nothing you can do but see them in pain, and just stand there. Just the word cancer scares my mom, as it has left a scar, a huge one on her heart. Cancer took away my role model. It took away the person I would ask for advice from, who would take me and help me out with job interviews. Grief has completely taken control of me, and I don’t even know who I am anymore. Every step I will take now will be for his sacrifices and struggles.

The topic of this essay is, how did cancer impact my life? I never deeply thought about how his cancer affected me, my daily life, and the way I perceived everything . It mostly made me feel guilty. Guilt for laughing and enjoying a moment, while he suffered. Guilt for buying something for myself, while my mom struggled. Guilt for sometimes talking back, and being a useless daughter. But I spent time with him because of his cancer. I was never close to my father. He was always working, and when he wasn’t working he was at home drowning in drinks. Whenever he took my younger brother out to zoos, places where any young child would want to go. He would ask me, yet I was so awkward with him that I never said yes. Cancer brought me close to him. I cherished our moments and made sure he knew that I was there for him. Many tell me that I was, but I pray that he knows.

I don’t think I ever got a chance to even pick up my pieces. At his funeral, everyone hugged me but whispered in my ear. “You have to take care of your mom now, she’s your responsibility.” I stand there, holding my sister tight as she has no idea of what’s going on. Right then and there, I picked myself up. Writing this essay makes me realize how I am falling apart. And that I have every right to. I hope that people soon realize that grief isn’t that easy. Cancer breaks families, and I hope that each one of them can heal.