



2025 Ben Strauss
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

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From the Other Side of the Storm

2nd Place

It has been years since the word cancer stopped echoing off the walls of my mind. Years since the sterile rooms, the dim hospital lights, and the quiet prayers whispered into the silence of night. I'm older now. Wiser, maybe. But still, when I close my eyes, I can return to those days in a heartbeat. The smell of antiseptic. The gentle beep of machines. The way everything in life suddenly felt paused—as though the world kept spinning, but our family was suspended in place.

From this side of the storm, I can finally tell the full story—the story of how cancer did not just touch my family, but reshaped it. Refined it. How it cracked us open, only to reveal a kind of love I never knew possible. Not the kind you read about in books or see in movies. A different kind. Gritty, enduring, patient. Love that sits beside you while you cry. Love that knows when to speak and when to simply hold a hand.

And at the center of that story is my mother. My best friend. My number one supporter. My therapist. My hero.

Back then, I was just a teenager trying to survive the average high school day while my mother fought for her life. I walked through school hallways trying to focus on math quizzes and group projects, but my mind was always elsewhere—hovering above her bed, wondering how she felt, whether the treatment was working, whether the side effects were worse than she let on. On the outside, I was composed. Smiling. Managing. But inside, I was a girl holding back a tidal wave. I learned to compartmentalize—to put on a brave face during the day and then crumble quietly in the shower, where the sound of running water could mask my sobs.



There was so much I didn't understand yet. How grief can live beside hope, how strength can come from simply showing up, how love sometimes looks like packing lunches and driving to appointments in the same breath. I was just beginning to learn that life rarely waits for you to be ready. That some days, the only thing you can do is take the next step.

Her diagnosis came like a lightning strike in the middle of a clear day. Stage 4. Aggressive. One moment we were laughing over dinner, the next we were sitting across from doctors with grave expressions and unfamiliar vocabulary. PET scans. Radiation. Biopsies. Chemotherapy. These words flooded into our world like a foreign language we were forced to learn overnight. Suddenly, everything else fell away. Homework didn't matter. College applications blurred. What mattered was her. Keeping her comfortable. Keeping her hopeful. Keeping her alive.

And somehow, despite everything, she was the one comforting me.

Even hooked up to IVs, weak from chemo, she found ways to lift me. She would squeeze my hand and say, "Don't worry Iza, we are stronger than this." And we were. She was. I just hadn't realized yet how much of her strength had already become part of me.

There's something deeply humbling about watching someone you love confront the very edge of life and still choose to smile. Still choose to ask you how you're doing. That was my mother. Even on the hardest days—when she was too weak to walk unaided, when her skin turned pale, when her hair fell out in clumps—she found a way to mother me. To wrap me in reassurance even as her body betrayed her.

Looking back now, I see that cancer wasn't just an unwelcome intruder—it was also a mirror. It showed me who we really were. It revealed the depth of my mother's courage and the resilience she had passed down to me like an heirloom.

She came to this country at twenty-two with nothing but a suitcase and a dream. She cared for a blind grandmother for a year, learned a new language, worked double shifts to pay her way through college, became a civil engineer, and had three daughters. She didn't just build roads and bridges—she built a life, a home, and a family grounded in love and strength. She did all of that quietly, without ever asking for recognition. Just one foot in front of the other. Just grace and grit.

And even cancer couldn't dismantle that.

I learned more during those years than I ever did in any classroom. I learned how to read the quiet in someone's eyes. How to tell when pain was hiding behind a smile. I learned how to advocate, how to ask the right questions in hospital hallways, how to stand tall even when my knees shook. I became fluent in the language of resilience. I knew what a low white blood cell



count meant. I could read the expressions of nurses and decipher what was being said between the lines. I learned how to wait—really wait—not just for results, but for good news, for strength to return, for moments that reminded us who we were outside of illness.

But I also learned how to celebrate the smallest things. A day without nausea. A good laugh. A shared meal. A snowy birthday that should have been a nightmare but instead became a memory of grace. That birthday—my mother’s first chemo session—was supposed to break me. But it didn’t. Because it snowed. Softly, defiantly. As if the world itself was saying, “Yes, this is hard. But beauty still exists.”

And that became my mantra. Even here, in the dark, beauty still exists.

There is something almost sacred about the way pain can shape you. I grew in ways I couldn’t have imagined. Not just emotionally, but spiritually. I stopped asking, “Why us?” and started asking, “What can I do with this pain? How can I honor it?” I began to see myself not just as a daughter, but as a witness and participant in something far greater than myself: the transformation of love under pressure.

I became more empathetic. More attuned to the suffering of others. More grateful for every hand I got to hold, every goodbye I didn’t have to say. Because we almost lost her.

And thank god, we didn’t.

She survived. Against the odds. She walked out of those hospitals. Cooked delicious dinners again. She supported me at my track meets. She looked radiant, reborn. Her hair, once gone, now came back fuller than ever, a crown earned in battle. I know not everyone gets that miracle. I don’t take it for granted. Not for a single moment. But what cancer gave me—what I now understand all these years later—is a deeper sense of community. Our family became an unshakable unit. My siblings and I, my father—we leaned on each other in ways we never had before. We took on roles that stretched us, supported one another through late nights and early mornings. We shared responsibilities, but more than that, we shared emotions. Vulnerably. Honestly. Love.

And people outside our family stepped in too. Friends, neighbors, teachers, even strangers. Meals appeared at our doorstep. Rides were offered without asking. Notes were left on our porch. The kindness of others became a lifeline. In the middle of the crisis, I saw what humanity was capable of. I felt seen, even when I couldn’t articulate what I needed.

From the other side of the storm, I see the whole picture now. I see a mother who bore pain with grace. Who faced her mortality and chose to fight. I see a daughter who became a quiet warrior. I



see a family that found strength not just in surviving, but in feeling everything—the fear, the anger, the gratitude, the joy.

And I see love. So much love.

Love that is fierce and steady. Love that doesn't ask for anything in return. Love that wakes up in the middle of the night just to make sure someone else is sleeping soundly. Love that stands beside a hospital bed and says, "I'm not going anywhere."

Now, as I live my life I carry her story with me. I carry her sacrifices, her strength, her smile. She is not just my mother. She is my foundation. My fire. The reason I believe in second chances and everyday miracles.

There is a kind of knowing that comes from watching someone you love suffer and still rise every day. It shifts your understanding of what matters. My ambitions have changed. My definition of success has evolved. I no longer measure life by achievements, but by the moments I am present, by the lives I can touch, by the grace I can offer to others.

If I could speak to that younger version of myself, sitting quietly in the hospital hallway, I would hold her close and whisper, "You won't believe how much you'll grow. You won't believe the woman you'll become." And I would say, most of all, "You were never alone. Not then. Not now. Not ever."

Because love, the kind my mother gives me, does not end. It lives in every breath I take. It built me. And it carried us through the storm.

It still carries us now.