



2025 Ben Strauss  
Higher Education Grant Essay Contest

**Julia Laboy**

*When Time Betrays*

**1<sup>st</sup> Place**

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Time has always been a tricky thing.

As a child, I thought of time as something I could control – something structured, predictable, and reliable. It was measured in countdowns to summer vacation, in the days leading up to Christmas, or in the minutes before the school bell rang. It was something I could look forward to; something that promised change, growth, and new beginnings. I never questioned its fairness or how much of it I had because, in my mind, time was endless. There would always be another school year, another birthday, another morning to wake up and start fresh. But that illusion shattered when my dad got sick.

The day my father was diagnosed with stage four bladder cancer, time no longer felt like a promise. It became something dangerous – something that could slip through my fingers no matter how desperately I tried to hold onto it. In some moments, it crawled unbearably slowly, stretching each agonizing second into an eternity as I sat by his side, waiting for news, waiting for change, waiting for answers that never seemed to come. Other times, it raced forward, blurring weeks into months, leaving me breathless as I struggled to process the speed at which my father's health declined.

I had always believed that time would give me the space to adjust, that it would prepare me for what was coming. But it didn't. Instead, it betrayed me, moving in unpredictable ways – sometimes freezing me in a painful present, and sometimes launching me forward before I was ready. And the worst part was that *no one* could tell me how much of it was left.

I tried to convince myself that if I *just* knew enough, I could somehow regain control. If I understood the science, the statistics, and the medical terminology, then maybe I would not feel

so powerless. I buried myself in research, typing the same desperate questions into Google over and over again, hoping for a different answer.

*Side effects of chemotherapy?*

*What is a neobladder?*

*Life expectancy for stage four bladder cancer?*

*Is there a cure for cancer yet?*

Each search left me more hopeless than the last. The answers I found were clinical, cold, and devastatingly final. I was looking for hope, or for just a grain of reassurance that my father's story would somehow defy the odds, but the internet had none to offer me. And neither did the adults in my life.

No one told me what was really happening. No one sat me down and explained just how little time we had left. I was given fragments of information – just enough to know that my father was sick, but not enough to understand the gravity of his condition. I was shielded from the truth, left to piece together my own terrifying conclusions. In the absence of real answers, my mind filled the gaps with worst-case scenarios, with monsters far scarier than any I had imagined as a child.

I did not just fear losing my dad. I feared the not *knowing* – the uncertainty, the unanswered questions, the feeling of being left behind in the dark while everyone else seemed to understand what was coming. And no matter how much I researched, or how much I begged for answers, I could not change the fact that time was running *out*.

His final weeks were a blur of uncomfortable visits, whispered conversations, and a growing sense of dread that settled in my chest like a weight I couldn't shake. I spent my birthday weekend packing my father's hospital bag, carefully folding his clothes and pretending that this was just another routine check-up. I did not know that this would be our last real interaction – that the next time I saw him, he would be bedridden on hospice; too weak to speak, too drugged to fully recognize me.

The man I had once seen as invincible was disappearing before my eyes. The father who had lifted me onto his shoulders at Disney World parades, who effortlessly whipped up the most delicious strawberry milkshakes to watch endless Marvel movies with my brother, who had silly jokes that made me laugh until my stomach hurt, who had promised to be there for every milestone – he was fading, slipping further away with each passing day. And I had no idea how to stop it.

When he died, time betrayed me one last time. Everything around me kept moving forward as if nothing had changed. The world did not stop to acknowledge my loss. There were still classes to attend, tests to take, and holidays to celebrate. But I felt frozen in place, trapped in

the moment of his final breath, unable to move forward even as life demanded that I keep going. I was not just grieving my father – I was grieving the future I had imagined, and the time I thought we still had.

For a long time, I felt angry – at the doctors, at my family, at myself. I was angry that no one had told me the truth, that I had been left to navigate my father’s illness with nothing but vague reassurances and internet searches. I was angry that I had wasted so much time being hopeful when I should have been preparing myself for goodbye. But most of all, I was angry at time itself – for moving too slowly when I was suffering, for moving too quickly when I wasn’t ready, and for running out before I *ever* got the answers I needed.

But grief, I learned, does not obey time. It does not move in a straight line, nor does it follow a predictable schedule. It lingers in moments when you least expect it, crashing over you like a wave one day and retreating into the background the next. Some days, it was unbearable – a heavy weight pressing on my chest, making it hard to breathe, impossible to think of anything else. Other days, it softened into a dull ache, a quiet reminder of what I had lost but one that allowed me to keep moving forward. At times, I thought I had finally outrun it, only for a familiar smell, a song, or a simple phrase to pull me right back into its grasp. Yet with time, something unexpected happened.

I began to heal.

I began to understand that even though I could not change the past, I could shape the *future*. I could not go back and demand the truth about my father’s condition, but I could make sure that no other child had to go through what I did. I could be the person who answers the hard questions, who offers clarity instead of vague reassurances, and who helps families navigate the impossible with honesty and compassion.

That is why I strive to become a pediatric nurse. No child should have to sit in the dark, piecing together terrifying possibilities because no one was willing to tell them the truth. No family should have to navigate the complexities of illness without the knowledge and support they need. *Everyone* deserves to understand what is happening, even when the truth is painful – because the only thing worse than knowing is *not* knowing.

When I think back to the darkest moments of my grief, I do not just remember the pain – I remember the people who helped pull me through it. The Cancer Support Community of Greater Philadelphia became more than just a resource; it became a lifeline, anchoring me when I felt lost in a world that refused to slow down for my loss. While everything around me carried on as if nothing had changed, they gave me something I did not realize I needed: a space where I could grieve openly, where I didn’t have to carry the weight of my father’s absence alone.

Through the support of the CSCGP and my other outlets, I was provided with books that gave words to emotions I couldn't untangle, discussions that reminded me I wasn't the only one feeling this way, and counseling that helped me navigate the unpredictable waves of grief. I slowly began to make sense of what had happened. I learned that grief is not something to be fixed or outrun, but something to be carried, understood, and transformed. The anger and confusion that once consumed me began to soften, making room for something new: acceptance, meaning, and the realization that even in loss, there is connection. Even in darkness, there is light.

My father's death could have shattered me. It could have left me bitter, lost, and paralyzed by the fear of time slipping away. But instead, it shaped me. Through the darkness of his cancer journey during the isolation of the pandemic, I found my purpose. The fear of being left in the dark, of not knowing how much time is left, now fuels my commitment to pediatric nursing – especially pediatric oncology. No child should feel alone in a hospital room, and no parent should struggle to explain cancer without support. I have lived through the uncertainty of illness, and I want to stand beside those facing it, offering clarity and compassion, even when the truth is difficult to hear.

Time has always been a tricky thing – not in how it moves, but in its unpredictability. I may still flinch at change and fear the unknown, but I refuse to let that fear define me. Instead, I will dedicate my life to ensuring that *no one* has to face that uncertainty alone.