



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program  
High School Essay Contest

# Juniper Sowden

*Waves*

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

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Since you passed, it's difficult to remember the good times. I often get stuck thinking about how you died. I've had to teach myself how to remember positive memories. My favorite is of us jumping over the waves at the beach together every summer when I was growing up. I still jump over the waves, but now I'm not jumping over them with you.

I was angry when you died. I was distraught when you were buried. I was lost when I turned 13. I hate the "5 stages of grief." These made-up stages feel like rules to follow when you lose someone. They're everywhere. When you died, Daddy, I assumed I had to follow these 5 steps. So, why was I so angry? And why did I want to forget everything? And why didn't I care at all? Why wasn't I crying like they do in the movies when a parent dies? And why did my stomach hurt? That wasn't one of the stages I had seen portrayed! So, when I was struck with the loss of you, my father, I thought I was grieving incorrectly. I had to teach myself that the 5 stages of grief aren't for anyone.

Cancer is misrepresented in the media. In books, movies—you name it—a cancer diagnosis means a bald head and sad family members. This stereotype is hurtful and inaccurate, just like the five stages of grief. I had to explain to my classmates when I was seven years old that cancer didn't just mean hair loss. In fact, you didn't lose your hair until a few years into treatment. I had to explain that stage 4 lung cancer was a disease that impacted everything about my life. I felt

like nobody understood, because it isn't shown in media. When you were diagnosed, your cancer had already spread to your brain. I was really scared, Daddy. You went into brain surgery almost immediately. Nowhere in any movie is there a portrayal of the absolute terror a child feels when they know their father could die at any given moment. I felt so alone in my experience, especially when I was younger. My little sister was only 5 at the start of your cancer diagnosis and didn't grasp the idea of cancer. I had nobody to relate to. As your treatment progressed over 5 years, I began to feel you slipping away. It became clear you would pass soon. But in every story I had heard, and every movie I had watched, there's always a happy ending where a miracle occurs, and nobody dies. Because of this, I couldn't bring myself to realize there aren't any miracles. My dad was going to die. You were going to die, and I couldn't do anything about it. I had to learn that the media is wrong about cancer and grief. The five stages of grief taught me there are designated steps you're supposed to feel in a specific order when you lose a parent. So when I felt anything outside of these 5 stages, I thought I was doing something wrong, which only made the grief worse. My frustration with these 5 stages comes and goes in waves.

In movies, you see kids crying when their parents die. No other emotions are allowed. Whenever the lost loved one is brought up, there are tears and poetic statements about how "they're never really gone." Every stereotype about grief is wrong. Whenever you're brought up, it gets awkward and quiet, and none of our family members speak. I never look up to the sky and wish my dad would come back, because I know you can't. I've never sat by the gravesite and spoken to you. In fact, I hate going near that grave. I hate being confronted by the fact that you're gone. I try to pretend nothing happened. Sometimes it's easy to forget; sometimes it's impossible. It goes in waves.

You passed away 3 years ago, Daddy. A lot has changed in those 3 years. I've switched schools, joined a field hockey team, been to over 15 concerts, learned guitar, been in 6 musicals, and made many new friends. Over these three years, I've learned what grief really is. I constantly wonder what you would think of me now. I look for my dad in everything he loved, expecting to find him there. That's my grief. My dad watched every single Phillies game he could. So, whenever there's a Phillies game on, I'll watch it. It's not fun anymore. He made it fun. That's a

part of my grief. My dad was a talented bass player, and he taught me the ukulele. So, when I learned to play the guitar, I expected the same praise I got from him when I learned the ukulele. I wish I could show him how much I've learned and all the songs I've written. A part of grief is realizing that I won't ever be able to show him that. I won't be able to share those moments with him. My dad was my first softball coach, and after he passed, I didn't want to play anymore. That's a part of grief to me. These realizations come and go like the waves we jumped over.

I'm going to prom this year, and you won't be able to see me in my dress. I know you really wanted to. I guess we share that feeling. Whenever I make a new friend, I wish you could meet them. I'll never know how you feel about my relationships. You'll never give my future husband your blessing. You won't walk me down the aisle. You won't meet your grandchildren. It's hard to grasp. I would give literally everything to talk to you one more time. I grew up being loved the most by my parents, and I'm lucky for that. But when half of the love you're given is abruptly ripped away, you fall apart. When half of a house's foundation is lost, it's bound to crumble after a while. The longer it stands without half its foundation, the more unstable it will become. Understanding that is what grief really is. Your absence, by far, is the heaviest weight I've carried. The weight comes and goes like waves, and is never steady, but it's always there.

Your absence is palpable. Cancer took away half of me. I don't just feel your absence in those big moments like holidays or life milestones. I feel the loss just by walking past your spot on the couch or finding one of your shirts in my laundry pile. When I miss you the most, I look through your Facebook account. I read all your posts, trying to remember how your voice sounded. I like seeing what you had to say; it helps me remember. It's really hard to look back at posts where you spoke about cancer, especially knowing how it ended. The last 6 months of your life didn't really feel like you were there. You were beginning to go before you even went. Some weeks you're all I think about, and some weeks I barely think about you. It comes and goes in waves.

I hate the awkward pause after I explain to someone that my dad passed from cancer. It's always uncomfortable. I feel bad for saying it, because my friends never know how to respond. Whenever dads are brought up in conversation, I feel left out, and the absence becomes more



evident. I never realized that after the first few months of grief, people will assume you've healed. You're expected to have gotten over it after a while. They stop asking how you're doing, and some will forget. For me, grief has become more prevalent in my life as time goes on. I miss you, Dad, more and more every day, and it hurts more now than it did two years ago.

As time passes, I've learned that grief isn't a melancholic feeling that tears bits of you away from the inside. Instead, grief is just love with nowhere to go, so it gathers inside you. Missing you feels like wanting to go home, wanting to return to a place of comfort, but you can't. When someone is dead, you lose every single way to express your love for them. All the emotion you feel, all the unspent love, builds and builds until you meet again. The empty feeling in your chest really isn't empty. Instead, it's bursting with love—love with no way out. Grief is different for everyone. There is no set path for grieving. Emotions change constantly. They come and go in waves. But what won't ever change is the love I'll always feel for you.