



2025 Ben Strauss Youth Program
High School Essay Contest

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Honorable Mention

I descended the stairs of my childhood home as my father answered the kitchen landline. Solemnly he stared at me, I, back at him. The conversation was barely audible, but I knew what had happened. I knew my mother was gone. At thirty nine my mother had succumbed to cancer just shy of two years after her diagnosis. And I felt nothing. Though the night before, I had felt every emotion.

The previous night my father was going to go visit her, however this time he sat me down and told me this would likely be it, the last trip he made. He suggested I write a letter so that he could read it to her. So I sat at the kitchen table writing her one last letter while sobbing my eyes out, to the point that I could barely see the paper I was writing on. It was the type of cry that silenced the room and left my body tingling. The type of cry that made my eyes puffy and raw and as tears traced my face they left stinging, inflamed trails in their place. What I would go on to write in that letter were the last words that I ever got the privilege of saying to her.

But this morning, I felt blank; I knew something was missing and I felt like I was missing something, but I couldn't force myself to feel any certain way. I felt like I should have been sad at that moment, but honestly I had spent two years seeing progressively less and less of my

mother, so there was nobody to miss. No stark contrast from seeing her every day to never seeing her, instead it was a slow and prolonged, a mirror to her cancer. So this morning, I just stared...and stared...and then went on with my day as if I were on autopilot.

The weeks, months, and years after my mother died are a blur to me. A chunk of time that contains snippets of deformed memories. A dusky night running, playing in the cul-de-sac, the other kids' laughs echoing in my mind. A faded memory of making cookies with my grandmother. The dark blue carpet in the classroom where I learned my multiplication tables. All seem arbitrarily smashed together, most bleeding, and some standing out in disconnected isolation. There is no sort of chronological order to these memories, nor can I seem to place them in any sort of order. A mishmash of images, fragments of movement, and conversations. They are all cut off prematurely...stunted; some just still images in my mind, no dialogue or motion to accompany them. I wish I had the words to describe what I was in, but no amount of words or time spent studying a dictionary could allow me to convey what I was suffocating in.

I realized at some point I was angry, no...enraged. Not understanding why *my* mother had to be taken. Why did she have to accept her fate? A fate that would prohibit her from watching her kids grow up, a fate that would not allow her the privilege of living to old age, a fate that kept her confined to a hospital bed. Why couldn't *I* have a normal family, like all of my friends? Why did *I* endure almost two years of anguish with doctors telling us she was getting better and then she was getting worse and then getting better again just for her to die in the end? I remember only a few weeks before she died, she had finally been cleared to go home and we were all beyond elated, so incredibly happy that things were finally looking up. Only for a home nurse to inform us she needed to be readmitted to the hospital that same day. And I felt the weight on my shoulders return, and the world had never looked so gray. That was the last time

my mother set foot in my childhood home. She died later that month. So why must *my* emotions be toyed with? Why did the universe do this to *me*, to *my* mother, to *my* family? I didn't know if there was a higher power out there, but if there was, I was enraged at it and I hated it and I wanted it to feel remorse for putting *me* through this.

I began to resent smiles. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that people could be enjoying their lives, smiling at me, when I was miserable and desperately trying to duct tape myself back together.

Over the course of the next few years many people came into my family's life to aid us in transitioning from being a four-person family to a three-person one. My father who was forty two at the time, me, his six year old daughter, and his one and a half year old son. Initially people brought us food, or rather, baked ziti. I think I ate baked ziti for three months straight. Please do not mistake this observation for me being ungrateful; we appreciated the food, but everyone made baked ziti. Our freezer was stocked full of trays of baked ziti, and I now cannot even stand the smell of it.

In the years since my mother's death, many of those people have kept the spirit of her alive. My aunt often tells me about their sibling rivalry. She once told me they had a long drawn out fight over a pair of fluffy, yellow, rubber ducky pajamas. I have heard many tales of summer beach trips that my mother and her friends would take. But the recurring theme in most of the stories that I hear is how intelligent and caring my mother was, especially towards my brother and me. People often tell me that I remind them of her. Apparently our handwriting is very similar. I unknowingly copy some of her mannerisms, and sometimes say things that are very "Kate like" as my father puts it. We both share a love for caesar salads and a dislike of olives.

And while these things might be coincidental, it does make me feel closer to her. Like I'm still getting to know her and she's not cemented in my past.

My Aunt B has always been the best at keeping my mother alive. She was my mother's childhood best friend, now my godmother, and the maternal presence that I crave. At the end of my mother's life, the two of them had a conversation. My mother made her best friend promise one thing, that my brother and I would always be taken care of. That she would remain in our lives even though she was not blood related and that she would be there for us. To this day, ten years later, Aunt B has kept that promise.

Aunt B has continued to share many things about my mother. She usually has pictures or a scrapbook to go along with her stories. Just the other day she showed me pictures and recounted stories of my mother at her Senior Prom. The photos were taken on a backyard deck in the shade. My mother wore a black dress with black kitten heels, her hair pulled back in a curly updo. She held a rose in one hand with her clutch tucked under her opposite arm. In the group photos, she stood tall next to her date, a guy who looked like your stereotypical airheaded jock. He wore a black suit that was a little too big for him. I will forever be grateful for learning about these moments and being able to see a different side of my mother, the happy carefree side of her; the side that existed before she was responsible for little human beings; before she had cancer. In a way these shared moments help to fill the empty portfolio of memories that we, as mother and daughter, will never get to experience together.

I wrote this essay to highlight the raw and uncut emotions that I as a child experienced losing my mother. I hope that no one has to experience a similar situation that I am in. However, if you are, I hope that you can find comfort in the similarities or differences in our stories and the fact that there are others out there that can empathize with your experiences, and are willing to



share their story with you. At least for me her death never got better, but it did get more manageable. My mother will forever be part of me as I am half of her. And sometimes that thought alone kept me going.