



13th Annual Ben Strauss

Middle School Essay Contest 2026

1st Place

Olivia Yoon

Glass on the Beach

People have said “you can’t be traumatized from that; you can’t even be sad. He’s still living and he survived so what’s the big deal?” They say it so casually, like survival erases everything that came before it. But what they don’t understand is what it’s like having to live with constant fear and anxiety. To go to sleep not knowing if my dad will still be there in the morning, to sit in the waiting room wondering if he would even wake up from the surgery. I didn’t know.

When my dad was first diagnosed, nothing looked dramatically different initially. Life kept moving on, but something in the atmosphere shifted. Even though I wasn’t the one going through the treatments, there was always a quiet voice whispering in my ear, telling me all the things that can go wrong, as if I hadn’t already been thinking about all of it. It wasn’t loud or dramatic, just there, sitting with me.

I felt lost and paralyzed by what the future might hold for my family. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t picture my life without my dad, and I didn’t know what I would do if he was gone. For months, I felt utterly hopeless. There’s this certain kind of sadness that would hit me in the middle of the school day. I would sit in class and everyone around me laughed about



weekend plans while I was quietly spiraling. Billions of thoughts ran through my head, and I just couldn't escape the rabbit hole.

Five years later, I am deeply grateful to still have my dad with me. After years of fighting, he went into surgery to remove the cancer in his throat. The operation itself was supposed to be a contained event, a controlled procedure. The doctors discovered that the cancer expanded further than it was shown on the scans. What was scheduled to be a straightforward path turned into a narrow maze. The surgeons eventually broke the agonizing wait and told us that they successfully removed all the cancer cells, finally closing a chapter that had threatened to rewrite our family's fate. For the first time in a while, I could breathe and my chest didn't feel like collapsing.

The voyage was never a smooth journey with calm seas. It felt more like a tsunami. Everything seems normal, a wave that is slowly building up but is small enough to look like every other wave. You close your eyes to soak in the sunshine and the warmth, and the wave has suddenly developed into a horrific torrent. Instantly, it crashes, dragging everything in its wake under the water. This journey has left me in pieces that I'm still trying to put back together. I learned that being brave isn't the absence of fear; it's showing up for your family even when the fear is overwhelming. It's continuing to walk down the path when there are doubts and uncertainty. Finding strength in moments when you feel like nothing is left.

There is no rule saying that you can only be affected by cancer if it ends in loss. Being a survivor doesn't mean that the demons are gone; it simply means that you no longer let them narrate your life. We often talk about winning the war, but we forget that the soldiers come back transformed. Resilience isn't about being cured of the fear; it's the strength to keep life going on top of the wreckage, knowing that the waves can come back at any moment. I am still mending the pieces, and I am certainly still healing, but I am standing. And for now, that is enough.