



**13<sup>th</sup> Annual Ben Strauss  
High School Essay Contest 2026**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Yasmin  
Mazouzi**

*Your Porridge is Ready*

It was eighth-grade summer when I was stuffing my suitcase to the brim with my newly bought clothes. I was excited to spend the summer overseas, with my family, in Morocco. Just as I was about to lock my suitcase, my mom called me to her room. My two brothers had already been seated on her storage bench near her bed. I squeezed in between them and found my spot in the middle.

“Tsanto mzyan”, she said. It translates to “listen well” in Darija.

She broke the news that we would not be going to Morocco this summer. And before I could jump out of my seat, she explained that my grandma had fallen sick and she needed to come to America to be treated. She went on into the specifics and said that there was a lump on her chest, which ended up being labeled as breast cancer.

At the time, I was not very knowledgeable about cancer since it had never affected me personally. Whenever I thought about cancer, all I could think of was either vibrant pink ribbons or barbers shaving their heads with cancer patients as a powerful act of solidarity. Little did I know that this was just the beginning of my life doing a complete 180.

My mother ended up going to Morocco two days after breaking the news to retrieve my grandma and fly back with her. Upon arriving, my mother explained that my grandma would be sleeping with me in my room, and since I had a trundle bed, I would go from sleeping on the top bed to the bottom. I was a little hurt about this, but I was compensated with a barbecue that cheered me up.

Soon enough, my calm stay-at-home mom transformed into an overwhelmed daughter. From washing dishes, folding laundry, and cooking meals to scouring for insurance, completing piles of paperwork, and staying overnight with my grandma at the hospital because she couldn't speak English, my mother stopped being my mom and started becoming my grandma's daughter.

I tied her kitchen apron around my neck, stepping into a new milestone of independence. Becoming the dishwasher, the cook, and the cleaner was not an easy transition. I was used to spending my afternoons hanging out with my friends after school or playing lacrosse, but those days were over. Fueled with anger about my early teen years being stolen from me, I transformed into a cold stone wall.

As days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, the loving, warm goodnight kisses I gave my grandma changed into night routines of constant bickering about trivial matters. Often finding myself waking up at the crack of dawn to fetch my grandma water or medicine, I became more frustrated about her stay. I felt like I was being taken advantage of. After my grandma's condition worsened, she started to request that I make her some porridge to take her pills with. I'd wake up at 4 in the morning to make her porridge and would bring it up to "our" room to give her. Being the clean freak I was, I took strong distaste at this process.

My social life slowly began to change. Family outings happened less frequently due to my grandma needing to be constantly watched, money turning scarce, and hangouts were postponed to dates that seemed impossible in my calendar.

Almost two years later, my grandma beat breast cancer. She rang her little bell and walked out of the hospital that haunted our family. I was over the moon when I heard the news. My family celebrated with couscous, a Moroccan dish that represents family and unity. Our home slowly began to regain its life.

I stepped down from bearing household responsibilities that didn't fit on my plate and began to rebuild my life block by block.

One day, I was driven home by my friend's mom after a hangout and shared the news with her. She expressed her happiness and told me to be grateful for this "blessing". She explained that her mom once had cancer and beat it, but then the cancer returned.

I confidently reassured her that this rediagnosis wouldn't happen to my grandma. She became healthy, poured out heartfelt laughs, and began joining my family on outings.

Pretty soon, her plane ticket back to Morocco was purchased, and I found myself waving goodbye at the airport.

A few months had passed, and then one random Thursday afternoon, my mom explained that she would be going back to Morocco and spending the weekend there.

To my surprise, upon her return, my grandma arrived with her.

She had been rediagnosed with cancer, leukemia specifically.

This time, leukemia hit my grandma harder than expected. She would cough up blood, become feverish often, and excessively bleed. After living with her through her first cancer, my heart warmed up, and I began to become empathetic towards her. I accompanied her often to hospital visits, and stayed with her late. I brought homemade meals, specifically porridge, because she claimed that I made it best.

Her condition worsened by the day, and soon enough, she exclaimed that she couldn't feel her legs anymore and was scared that death was going to get the best of her. I reassured her that everything would be alright. Chemotherapy had also taken a toll on her health, and her hair began to fall out in large chunks, which I imagined would never happen after being used to brushing her henna-dyed hair and putting it in a braid every night.

I learned how to become numb and tolerate blood, which was one of my biggest fears, to patch my grandma up when she needed it. She now would navigate the world through her wheelchair, and my mother and I would take turns pushing it.

I woke up startled one day with my grandma fainting on the floor. My immediate reaction was to call my mother, who then called an ambulance to bring her to the hospital. My mother was able to revive my grandma and helped her navigate to the front door. I handed my mom a tote bag with water and some healthy snacks. While everyone went outside to say their goodbye's to my grandma, I stayed inside, worried that the entire street would see me wearing my mismatched pajamas.

My brothers, I, and my dad stayed busy at the laundromat doing laundry because our washing machine had broken down. Occupied with laundry, my mind thought little of my grandma, who was at the hospital. In my eyes, it was just "another visit". Hours passed, and it was almost night when I decided to call my mom. She picked up, her voice was shaky, and told me that she was talking to the doctor and had to hang up. I ran to my brothers since my strong mom's voice turning shaky was an extremely rare occurrence. We phoned our mom's siblings and were told that my grandma had passed away.

In shock, I began uncontrollably sobbing while my two brothers remained stoic and calm. We took an Uber to the hospital, and before my eyes lay the body of my grandmother covered by the hospital blankets.

The ride back home was quiet. My mom's eyes turned dull. That's when I realized that her mother figure was no longer present, and I couldn't imagine a scenario where mine wasn't. We eventually arrived home. I put the wheelchair in a neat corner in the garage, doing my best to hold myself up. My mind flooded with negative thoughts.

If only I were nicer, she wouldn't have been as stressed, and her health would have been better.  
If only I had spent more time with her instead of pushing her away.  
If only I had kissed her goodbye just as I kissed her welcome.

But grief doesn't answer "if only"; it sits with you, and stings you the minute it hits you. For a long time, I let those thoughts define me. It took me a while to realize that the only way to honor her wasn't through guilt but through change.

Now, I don't wait. I say goodbye properly. I sit a little longer. I show up more often. I've learned that love isn't in the grand gestures and can be expressed through small acts, like waking up at 4 AM to make porridge.

The porridge that I once resented became the one thing connecting us. And although I can no longer bring it to her bedside, I carry what it represents with me: love, patience, and care.

Her porridge is no longer ready, but I am.