

Dear Cancer,

Though you may break my heart. I'll never let you break my spirit.

You've held a steady hold on my life since the day I was born, forcing my hand in a game I didn't ask to play. October 25, 2001. I wasn't even conceptualized, let alone born yet. My brother sat on my mother's lap, a mere 4 months old. It was a birthday party. Until it became a horror show.

You see, this is the day my dad found out about you. Tests had been run, diagnosis confirmed. Oligodendroglioma in the frontal lobe, the size of a golf ball. And though I had not yet been born, this would change the course of my life exponentially.

Flash forward three years, give or take, to September 8, 2004, the day I was born. One month too early and a hell of a fighter already. *Isabella*. A name given to me in that early morning hospital room after a long night of pain, the name on my roll call, the name meaning "Pledged to God" or something like that. But as I began to grow into the 8-letter Isabella..., we began to figure out that maybe it wasn't quite the name for me. Isabella... was church dresses and clicky shoes down a long dark hallway. No, no, I wasn't quite that, and though well-intended, Bella didn't quite suit me either.

Izzy

Yes! I am Izzy, the same one who as a child did indeed believe she was a magical mermaid (my tail was purple because, of course), and sadly, yes, the same girl who left the room sobbing in sixth grade on "Brain day" because, let's face it, brain cancer sucks.

But back to the beginning of my journey alongside cancer.

My dad.

Was a very strong man.

So I'm told.

Would have spoiled me so much

Apparently

Loved me.

I think.

You see time has really flown and I'm sad to say that I don't remember too much from my childhood. But I remember the doctors. Born from mental illness, I've attended therapy for as long as I can remember. Dad went to the doctors a *lot*, and as a child I had to get a lot of vaccines, as most children do. Though they didn't quite put together that growing up associating doctors with your sick father sort of installs a fear of them into you. But not just doctors.

Needles.

"Oh no, no, no," you might be saying. "Well Izzy I was afraid of needles as a kid too, it's pretty common." I don't think you understand the deathly fear that ran through my body anytime I had to receive anything by needle.

So where are we so far? Ah yes, doctors are scary and I hate needles. Despite all I had going against me, I was a very sociable kid, (Plot twist, the liquid clogging my ears!) despite the whole

deaf scare , I started talking normally , and a lot. Loudest in my class and probably the school, and by the time I made it to kindergarten at the age of 4 (Late birthdays really suck like that, as to this day I'm one of the youngest in my grade) I had enough friends to count on one hand. If I even could count at this point.

But anyways flying through school I was on top of the world! Entering first grade went swellingly! Split my chin open on a rock on the first day , ended up with five stitches , a dope scar and something to show off at school. All while not even having a clue about my father's slowly worsening condition. Sure , I must've known he was sick. At least I think I knew. I mean we had a hospital bed in the house , and he couldn't even get out of it. So I must've known right?

Right?

October 15 , 2010

I am six. The whole family came over today. I don't know why. Or maybe I do. My brother and god-sibling plays outside with me, we're swinging. Up

And

Down

Up

And

Down

And then the back door opens.

And though I thought they took that liquid out of my ears years ago , my world falls silent.

“It happened”

I'm running

Or maybe I'm just walking , I'm not sure but all of a sudden everyones crying.

I think I am too.

My brother says nothing.

He is nine.

And maybe his nine year old emotions are far too complex for me then but it's here that his wall goes up.

And never comes down.

I don't know when my family leaves my house that day.

I don't know what happens the rest of that day.

I don't remember falling asleep.

But I must've because now there's a funeral.

All my friends from school are there , and we're running around. I remember playing.

Apparently I was screaming.

But. I

Can't.

Remember.

Weeks feels like years and years feel like minutes and soon enough I'm nine.

We're moving.

You died in this house, dad.

And we're leaving to somewhere new.

Maybe we're leaving you here too.

My brother has a best friend.

I see him all the time.

We go to his house a lot. My brother's best friend came to my dad's funeral. But we don't really talk about it. *Maybe if I don't talk about it , it means it didn't happen?* My brother's best friend has a big family. Their house is smaller than our new house , but they still let us stay there sometimes. Mom goes on vacation for two weeks. And when I'm crying alone because I feel abandoned, my brother's best friends dad makes sure I have a smile on my face.

I don't remember all the days we spent there. All the nights I spent there alone , or with the siblings. They had chickens , and we got to meet all the new chicks , and even get eggs sometimes. I have a lot of memories in that house. But I began to learn that cancer follows.

And death follows with it.

I am in middle school. I learn how to ride a bike. When you have a panicked single mother, you don't really get to learn those things as a kid. I don't tell anyone. As I begin to get taller (finally!) , my mood begins to spiral. It's funny how having a therapist your whole life can really change your views on mental health. I knew all the warnings, I knew I was in danger. I knew I was slowly breaking down. I don't tell anyone. I don't want to feel like a sick person.

Maybe if i ignore it all , it will all go away.

Sixth and seventh grade feel like a blur of emotions. My best friend's mom is diagnosed with breast cancer. My grandma is diagnosed with breast cancer. They both survive. But do we?

January 22 , 2018

My brother and his 'best friend' haven't talked in a really long time. They're juniors now, so the whole "growing apart" thing hit them pretty hard. His friend had to stop going to school to take care of his father. He was diagnosed a while ago, we all remembered. But he's getting bad.

Today my mom is taking me to the doctors office. For a checkup , I think. As we drive, everytime I close my eyes , I can only see one thing. One word.

Death

I brushed it off. I went to school. Come home to find out my brothers best friend's dad, died that morning.

His funeral is different from my father's. I do not scream. I do not sob. I only sit.

8 years after the death of my father.

8 years after you took hold of my family.

And silently cry.

Single tears sliding down my face.

And all I can do then

Is listen.

I do not know what cancer has in store for my future. I am 15 years old , wondering about when my next health scare will come rearing its ugly head around the corner. I've gone through a lot, of this, I'm sure. But I also know my pain had given me endless opportunities for growth. I will never say that I am grateful for cancer or anything it has done for me, I am only grateful I was able to live up to who I was meant to be. Not Isabella, the girl of god.

But Izzy,

The girl who got through it.