

Dear Cancer, a Peek Into the Life of one of Your Victims

Dear Cancer,

You have changed my life in many ways. I could spend all my time wishing that all the damage you've done wasn't there, wishing that you hadn't taken so much away from me, and wishing that things were different. I could do all of that, but that won't undo the damage that you have done. You know what has been done and that the holes you've created in my life can never be repaired, but what you don't know is how those holes have affected me. You started planning where these invisible craters would be 25 years before I was even born, when my Dad was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Luckily, my Dad was stronger than you and he won that battle, but you couldn't leave him alone. You decided that it wasn't enough.

No eleven year old girl should have to sit at the dinner table and be told that her Dad was diagnosed with cancer, specifically squamous cell carcinoma in the lymph glands in his neck, but you didn't care. Most eleven year old girls worry about if their friends are in their classes, but I was worrying about my sick Dad. He had done it before, he'd been through chemo, the radiation, the battle, and you made him do it again. You put him and my family through more than I could've imagined, and month after month I wondered when you would leave us alone. Finally, things seemed to calm down, but I should've known better, because you never know when enough is enough. My Dad went in for a PET scan, which we all thought would come back clear, but when the scan showed lit up spots on the lungs, you sat back and cackled because you knew what was coming. We spent weeks waiting for the biopsy results to be back, being told that "the spots are probably just a small infection". Meanwhile, you just sat waiting for our lives to come tumbling down like you do with every other family's door you walk into uninvited. Soon enough, my brothers and I were seated down at the dinner table and were told, once again, that our Dad had cancer. By now it felt like you were an invisible sibling that we had gained,

always sitting in on our family conversations. This time though, you had dug a hole even deeper than before because the cancer was worse, it was fatal.

My Dad had been diagnosed with Mesothelioma, an extremely rare and deadly lung cancer. I don't think that at the age I was, I fully understood what that meant but believe me, you made it crystal clear. After a third cancer diagnosis, my Dad went in for chemo and radiation yet again, and we were told that the best chance of survival was to have surgery. My family decided we wanted my Dad to receive this surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, because a surgeon specializing in mesothelioma worked there. When my parents flew out, the plan was that he would have surgery, and then they'd come home and we would have years left to make memories and spend time together. I should have known that things don't really go as planned when you are lurking in the shadows of our lives.

The surgery did not work, the cancer had spread and doctors couldn't remove it. We tried to make the best of things and fly him home to get the most time we could, but that didn't happen either. My Dad got pneumonia, and his health was declining even faster than before. That was when my family and I flew out to see my Dad. A few days after he was moved to hospice, his doctor told my family and I that my Dad wasn't going to make it through the night. I went in to say goodbye to my Dad. My 12 year old self was lost, scared, frustrated, but mostly, devastated. His hands and feet were already cold and he was unresponsive, but the doctors said that he would still be able to hear me. I spent my private time whispering in my Dad's ear how much I love him, thanking him for everything he had ever done for me, for everything he had ever taught me. I even somehow managed to choke out The Lord's Prayer, which he had taught me as a young girl, and we used to say every night before bed. That night as I was laying in the bed, wondering why you had to put us through so much, I heard the hotel room door open, close, and the sad footsteps that dragged their way to the other side of the bed. My mom had come home from the hospital, and that was the exact moment I knew my Dad was in heaven. As I layed on my side, looking into the lit up New York City, with tears running in a constant stream down my young face, I wondered how you could be satisfied with yourself after doing such a terrible thing to the most undeserving man.

The next couple weeks full of numbness were spent arranging the perfect funeral for my Dad. I was 12 years old, just a few weeks before entering seventh grade, and I was memorizing Bible verses that I would recite at his funeral. All my friends were picking out their first day of school outfits, while I was picking out the dress that I would wear to my Dad's funeral. Cancer, you took away the best man on the planet, the one who taught me good values and life lessons. You took away the man who supported everything I ever did, who put a roof over my head, who shared a passion for cooking with me and who taught me how to do it. When you took away my Dad, you took away so much more than a parent. You took away the rest of the summers we never got to spend in the garden we started together, the milestones in my life that my Dad will never be able to go to, and the special moment every other girl gets with her father as he walks her down the aisle. You took away a father, husband, son, brother, and friend. But you did not take away our memories. Three years later, I thought that you had finally gone away, or gotten lost hiding in the shadows of our grief. I thought that you had finally had enough, but again, I was wrong.

In February of my freshman year of high school, just two years after you stole my Dad away from my family, I went to the doctor. When they felt a lump in my neck, the doctor sent me down for an ultrasound immediately. The ultrasound showed very concerning images and the next day I was back at the hospital, getting a biopsy. A couple days later, you struck again. I walked in to my house from school and my mom told me that I was diagnosed with papillary thyroid cancer. I was enraged. There were so many things running through my mind. You have made yourself the 6th member of the Hermann family, you were there all the time and as soon as you didn't get the attention you craved and needed you would steal the show. The next few weeks were spent discussing the steps of my treatment. As I tried to balance all of my finals in school and the terrible news, the only thing that I wanted was my Dad. I wanted my Dad to help me get through it the way he did when he was in high school. I wanted my Dad to tell me that it was okay and that I could be strong, but I couldn't have that, because you took him away from me forever.

After I received a full thyroidectomy, my diagnosis changed to follicular thyroid cancer. This led to a few extra steps in treatment, I had radiation via radioactive iodine, a new special diet, and I was even quarantined. I came out on top, in honor of my Dad and am grateful to say that I am now cancer free. You did some terrible things to my family; you seem to be perpetually sticking around haunting us, but I will never let you get the best of me.

Through all the adversity you put me through, you taught me more about myself and about life than I ever could have imagined. You taught me how to be strong, and how it's also okay not to be. You taught me that it's the little things in life that make everything worthwhile. You taught me how to see the positive things in life, because it's too short not to and because every moment spent feeling sorry for yourself, is a moment lost making a memory that can never be replaced with someone you love. You've taught me how important family is and the power of love. You showed me time after time how beautiful it is when community comes together. For example, when I was sick I received more than 500 cards from all around the country encouraging me and reminding me that I am stronger than you will ever be. You taught me that it is important to celebrate. Celebrate everything because life is too short and unpredictable to take it for granted. You taught me to be thankful that I have a body that is capable of fighting you off.

You have even given me opportunities that have bettered me permanently, such as when I was asked to share my story at Relay for Life for their 25th anniversary. That night, you gave me the chance to go into hundreds of people's hearts, to inspire, and to give hope. You allowed me to better myself, and for that, I say thank you. Thank you for making me stronger. Thank you for teaching me everything that you did, for bettering me in ways I never knew were possible, and for changing my outlook on life. Thank you, cancer, for giving me everything that you did. I am stronger now because of you. I have learned how to turn on the lights of life, and to live in pure light and happiness, so that there aren't any shadows left for you to lurk in. Finally, you can leave my family and me alone. Forever.