

Dear cancer, I am Julia. Until December 2017, I had never been in a hospital. I considered myself a model of good health - I ran daily and ate a balanced diet. When I abruptly became sick with debilitating headaches and nausea that changed. After weeks of fruitless visits to the doctor's office, urgent care center, and emergency room, an MRI finally revealed the source: a brain tumor. It's not so nice to meet you.

After the MRI, with the nebulous news of a "golf ball-sized mass" in my brain, I remember sitting weakly in a bathtub. A few tears slid down my cheek, as I asked myself *why the brain?* I had always thrived academically, my love for learning essential to my identity. I felt betrayed. Dear cancer, *why have you done this to me?*

Thanks to treatment at Children's Hospital and Mayo Clinic, my pursuit of learning continued. Still, the diagnosis of a rare but curable pediatric cancer known as germinoma forced me to accept a new identity. Though I had been strong from years of cross country running and skiing, I became weak. Six mile runs were replaced by exhausting 5 minute walks as I recovered from brain surgery. Dear cancer, I am Julia and I am fighting.

Thanks to my shiny bald head and frequent absences, word spread. In every gaze of a classmate or teacher I heard "cancer" echoing through their thoughts. Nevertheless, I was constantly supported by my community, for which I am deeply grateful. They were with me as I first covered my newly shiny head with scarves, then wore it boldly bald, and finally as I embraced its beauty, painting it like a canvas. Gradually, this particularly visible characteristic became part of my identity. Dear cancer, I am Julia and I am "that girl with cancer."

Through it all, I wrote daily to reflect on my evolving identity. It was through my writing that I took advantage of a convergence of passions: an essay contest to win a parent-free trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA) at the border of Minnesota and Canada. Reflecting on a childhood of camping in the BWCA, I realized how relevant the wilderness was to my life; even as I battled brain cancer, I relied on lessons I learned in a canoe. Dear cancer, I am Julia and I am so much more than you.

While living with cancer, being outside helped me hold onto perspective and quiet my mind. Even in the chilling Minnesota winter, I went outside daily to refresh myself. Additionally, a childhood in the woods and lakes had taught me both patience and resilience, as if the wilderness knew to prepare me for this challenge. Learning that I had won the essay contest while in an elevator at the Mayo Clinic on my way to receive my first radiation treatment filled me with hopeful anticipation for the summer - my treatment would be complete and I would celebrate in the BWCA with dear friends. Dear cancer, I am Julia and you can't stop me.

Before this adventure could begin, I eagerly awaited the day when I would officially be declared "cancer-free" and be able to put this episode of my life behind me. However, when this day finally came, fear accompanied the joy. *Who was I without cancer?* Dear cancer, I am Julia but where do I go next?

Like when I was in treatment, I handled this transition by capturing the joy in every day. On my parent-free camping trip, I took hold of the strength and responsibility that had been wrenched from me upon the diagnosis. Shortly after, I expanded upon my passion for the BWCA and advocated for its protection from sulfide ore copper mining

with lawmakers in Washington D.C. accompanied by 6 other driven youth. Since then, we have empowered over 70 other youth to join us on two more trips to D.C., as our movement of Kids for the Boundary Waters quickly mobilized. Dear cancer, I am Julia and I am moving on.

Being a cancer survivor is a fresh part of my identity; I am still exploring how it fits in with who I am. My perspective has changed most: I cling to positivity, knowing my self-talk builds my reality. And even more than before, I know that I am strong and will persist through adversity, aided by a little love. Dear cancer, I am Julia.