

Dear Cancer:

You stole my childhood.

It's definitely not what you want to hear from a cancer survivor, but to anyone who suffered from childhood cancer, it's very true. It's never something a kid should have to worry about, yet it consumes your life when you're in the thick of it, and it will continue to follow you through life no matter how much you wish it wouldn't. With that being said, it hasn't always been horrible, and dealing with cancer at a young age has actually turned me into the person I am today. That is why when my school counselor told me to enter this essay contest I was excited to be able to share my experiences with more than just people who know me.

To start out I would like to introduce myself: My name is Ella and I go to Minnetonka high school. I am in my junior year, I'll be turning seventeen in January, and when I was thirteen I received some of the most devastating news of my life.

Middle school sucks. Truly, it is a miserable place, but it really gets us ready for high school where it also sucks, just slightly less and there are cooler people. I honestly don't remember most of middle school except for it not being the most fun experience ever, but I vividly remember this. It was nearly the end of my seventh grade year, and I'm sure the day was going a little slow since the year was drawing to a close, so I was just mindlessly scratching my neck. However, strangely enough, I felt something? I then felt closer to try and examine if I had even felt anything out of the ordinary at all, or if my mind had just tricked me. But there it was. A small lump on the left side of my neck near my collar bone. It also did not help that I am my mother's daughter, and from her I so graciously was given the same nervousness about

everything, so of course immediately I was frightened and continued to touch this small lump on my neck for the rest of the day. When I got into the car at the end of the day when my mom came to pick me up from school, I remembered to tell her about that weird lump. Thankfully she didn't write it off as nothing, and we made an appointment to see my pediatrician. About a week later we go into the doctor's, but my pediatrician didn't seem concerned at all. So I went home with a referral to see an ENT specialist to see if anything was really wrong, even though she had no reason to suspect anything was out of the ordinary. For all she knew it was probably just a swollen lymph node that was still swollen from fighting off a cold, or something of that sort. But after this doctor's appointment we kind of forgot all about this little lump, after all, my doctor wasn't concerned, so why should we have been! She was probably right about it being just a swollen lymph node fighting a cold virus. Nothing dangerous, right?

However little thirteen year old Ella was getting suspicious. Something about all of this didn't feel right. Months had passed since May when I first had this swollen lymph node, and I didn't feel sick? I couldn't have a cold, I would have felt sick at some point! But I never did. This caused me to relentlessly bother my parents. Telling them to make an appointment with the ENT specialist! Because I really felt that it was better to be safe than sorry. So after a while, I convinced them. I would have loved to go into this appointment to find out that I was wrong to think that there could be something more going on, and I really thought that would be the case! But when we went in basically all that happened was a doctor felt my neck, said he didn't feel the lump I was talking about, and I thought that was going to be the end of it! I thought that he was just going to send us home and think we were silly for wasting his time. But he said he believed me. He made it clear that since it was something I thought was wrong he trusted me and told me, "there's no one who knows your body better than you do, so I'm going

to trust your judgment better than what I can feel now” that made me feel a lot better about the whole situation. He scheduled a CT scan for the very next morning at the Children’s Hospital in Minneapolis.

The CT scan was not fun. It makes your blood feel hot, your mouth taste like pennies, and kind of makes you think you’re peeing your pants. But it was one of the things that saved me. Through those scans, they found some irregularities in the front of my neck. Then, not too long after that, I had an FNA, or a Fine Needle Aspiration because they wanted to biopsy the spot that was looking suspicious.

Then, it happened.

The call.

I sat in my room, in bed, doing some homework while listening to music. But I heard my mom crying from the other room so I did what any thirteen year old would do. I paused my music and eavesdropped. I didn’t want to make it obvious that I was listening, so I just put the stuff I was working on for school away and listened. And then I waited. And waited. And I continued waiting until my mom came in. Basically to make an already long story short, my mom had to bring me some of the most devastating news of my life.

On November 16th, 2016 I was diagnosed with cancer.

I was formally diagnosed with Papillary Thyroid Carcinoma, or a fancy way of saying that I had thyroid cancer. However, most of the people that do get it are fifty to sixty year old women. That was a real confidence booster for me as a child, because now I’m the little kid

who got old lady cancer... One thing that is good about they type of cancer I got is that it's a very treatable form of cancer, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with.

“If you're going to get a type of cancer this is the one you'd want to get!”

That is *actually* something an *actual* doctor told me. Directly to my little thirteen year old face! Let's get one thing straight: there is no good type of cancer. To be quite fair, it's also not something you should tell your patient, who is in fact a child. Cancer is cancer and that means your body is not being too kind to you, and that's no fun for anyone. No matter what type of cancer you have.

After the diagnosis, it all really set in. I was getting a vital organ removed, I would have to go through treatment, be on synthetic hormones for the rest of my life, and have to deal with about a bazillion side effects, most of which are not very fun. I was being forced into growing up. It wasn't by choice, it was necessary. This wasn't something a regular thirteen year old could deal with. I had to be mature, whether I liked it, or not. While my friends at school are worrying about things like what role they'd get in the middle school's drama class play we wrote ourselves, or stressing out about a test in school, or worrying about their crush finding out they liked them, I got to worry about my cancer. No young teenager should have to constantly think about the problems that come with having cancer. Yet there was no escaping it. There was absolutely nothing I could do. It's not something you can wish away on your birthday candles, or something that if you ignore it long enough it'll die like a houseplant. I was stuck. And the only thing I could hope for was support, from friends, from family, and from the people I relied on to help me get better.

Every aspect of the whole process was hard to deal with. My mom was absolutely crushed, and I felt like a financial and emotional burden. Having cancer is expensive, and I felt that the pain brought on to the people I loved was far too much to handle. That's why I was forced into being much more mature than most thirteen year olds. I had to learn to be an adult in the situation even though I'm still a kid. Sure sometimes I wish it would have never happened, but if it hadn't, I would be so different today. I can't fathom truly how different of a person I would be, but the experience of having cancer taught me more than I can cram into an essay. It's something that is a part of my life now, and having accepted that, I use it to my advantage. I learned that tough experiences make people who they are. If we all coasted through life with nothing bad happening to any of us, we'd all be living pretty mundane, similar lives. Although cancer may have taken part of my childhood, I choose to look at it as something that helped me grow into the person I am, and I don't think I'd change it even if it had caused me heartache, inconvenience, and pain.

It's part of who I am.