

Dear Cancer, It's Me

By Eileen Zhang

Imagine that you could go back in time and be nine years old again—just a little kid, innocent, naive—with no idea that there are terrible forces out there in the world, like injustice, poverty, and disease. Every day is the same routine with the same faces and the same places and nothing is ever unexpected. The worst thing you ever have to deal with is that one page of simple division your 3rd grade teacher assigned for homework. And, of course, being nine years old, you expect everything to stay that way and for nothing to change.

But then imagine being told that your mommy is sick and has cancer. You have so many questions—What does that mean? What's going to happen? Is it bad? What are you going to do? What even *is* cancer?—whirling through your little nine-year-old brain. You feel confused... and scared. So afraid that you even tell your friends at school about it, but they don't understand either. After all, they're just 3rd graders, too.

Then the day comes when your mommy is gone for one day. *She's in the hospital*, they said. *She's going to have a surgery to get rid of a boo-boo, but she'll be home tomorrow. Okay*, you tell them because what else are you supposed to say? *Okay*. And your mommy, who has always been there every single day when you come home from school, isn't there. That night, you lay in bed, thinking, wondering, for the millionth time if everything is going to be okay. If your mommy is okay. Because you're just a little nine-year-old kid, and you need her to be okay. *Please let her be okay*.

If you can imagine that, then you know how I felt when I was nine years old. I remember waiting anxiously the whole next day. I waited from morning till evening, from breakfast, through school and dinner, until finally my mommy was home. I was elated, overjoyed to see her. *She's okay*, I had thought. *My mommy is okay*.

But the battle wasn't over yet. As the months passed, I watched my mother as she suffered through chemotherapy. I watched as she lost her hair, and became incredibly weak. I watched as her appetite waned and she struggled to even raise her arm. As I watched and observed these painful moments, I realized I was also witnessing courage and resilience.

My mother stayed positive throughout the whole ordeal. She continued to believe that things could only get better, and, to quote the song "Hope in Front of Me" by Danny Gokey which she listened to every day: "No matter how bad it gets // I'll be alright". Despite the circumstances, my mother strived to stay healthy by eating well, exercising consistently, working hard to reduce stress, and surrounding herself with friends who were just as positive as she was. This optimism is one of the many lessons my mother indirectly taught me at that time. There are always tough situations in life, but the best way to deal with them is to be upbeat and positive. Being pessimistic will only drag you down further.

Though this situation was difficult, I did learn another very important lesson: how to be more independent. Before, it had always been my mother who had helped me with everything—from homework to even showers. But now that she wasn't able to help me, I learned to become a problem solver with my homework, to be more responsible and wash my hands constantly so as to not get her sick, and to take my own showers

without anyone else's help. I learned that being independent does not necessarily mean I am alone; it means having the will and ability to do things on my own and in my own way.

In fact, I was far from alone. I had my family and friends who were always there to help out if needed. My grandparents traveled all the way from China in order to assist us in any way possible, my dad worked constantly to financially support us, and my friends were there to help me have fun at school and to keep at least one aspect of my life the same. Because of them, I wasn't completely uprooted by this dramatic change in my life—they helped to keep me grounded.

The whole situation had been entirely unexpected, but no one really expects for terrible things to happen. At the age of nine, my eyes were opened to the complexity of the world, to the greater forces at work in its vastness, and I realized how small and insignificant the world I had known was in comparison. I saw how truly fragile health was, and how necessary it is to take care of oneself.

As of now, I am fifteen years old and my mother is six years cancer-free. My experience with cancer has become a piece of the past, and hopefully it will stay that way. Its impact, however, will stay with me forever. I am still able to look back and continue to learn even though it was years ago. I do more now to take care of myself, such as maintaining a healthy diet, exercising consistently, and, most importantly, finding the best ways to help myself destress. After all, stress always yields bitter fruits, never sweet ones, and it is upon this foundation that I have built a new, sustainable lifestyle. Optimizing my physical and mental health is my way of minimizing my risk for cancer, along with other health issues. But I know that sometimes, like with my mother,

cancer can happen regardless of how healthy a person is. There are some parts of a person's life that are out of one's control, but that does not mean one cannot try to at least tweak our fates, even just in the slightest. Even the smallest of changes can have an effective outcome.

Even now, I have taken my personal experience and done my best to support causes related to cancer. I volunteer when I can with the United Cancer Advocacy Action Network (UCAAN)'s holiday gift-wrapping fundraisers, and have performed music at the Cancer Support Community in Westlake Village for a Christmas celebration. I have also joined school clubs that work to support cancer patients, like the Cancer Awareness Club (CAC), Knitting is Giving Club, and Relay 4 Life Club. I want to do my part and support others who are worrying, just as I did at age nine, praying for their loved ones to be okay. No person—no child—should have to experience that alone.

But to all those who are experiencing such stress and unease, I want to share with them the lessons that I learned from my own experience—lessons that I will remember for the years to come. I want them to know that positivity can go a long way, and that being independent doesn't mean you can't ask for help. Most of all, I want them to know that no matter how bad it gets, no matter how dark the night or how wild the storm, nothing lasts forever, and there is always hope in front of them. So years later, when they look back, they can say with a triumphant smile, "Dear cancer, it's me."