

## Bumps in the Road

Elizabeth Klehr

Tragedy defines a person or more accurately stated how a person deals with tragedy defines them. I choose to believe that it tears someone down in the moment, allows them to see life from a different perspective and then builds them back up. If we lived in a world without bumps and turns in the road, life would be simple and boring. The adversity we face and the struggles we conquer are the things we tell our children and grandchildren. They are the topics of books, movies, and TV shows. How boring would a book be if there was nothing the character had to overcome? In no way am I glorifying terrible things that happen but instead looking at my life and seeing all the positives that came from my diagnosis.

Cancer is a word we hear spoken with a disgust as if it is a living breathing enemy. It is something we all fear but never really expect to have ourselves. We are impacted simply by the distantly related relatives we have lost and the articles that pop up in our feed explaining some admirable survival story. The books bring tears to our eyes and the movies win awards once they hit theaters. It is a word, a disease, that can never be truly understood.

As the word “cancer” left my mom’s lips when she explained my test results I felt a numb feeling throughout my body. It was hard to imagine a mutation, a foreign unwanted invader, was taking residence in my own body. I felt fine and had no symptoms others than a lump below my right ear and yet here I was running scenarios of death through my mind. I wasn’t suffering like the kids in the movies. I hadn’t been hospitalized once in my life. I was that healthy kid that played soccer nonstop and ran precariously through life, and yet I wasn’t healthy

and I wasn't invincible. I think the hardest thing for me to grasp was that my life is finite. The size of a pin drop in time.

I was frustrated with God, wondering why me. What had I done to deserve this? Looking back at it now, no one deserves cancer, and most definitely not childhood cancer. A disease that has stumped scientists and doctors for years. A jigsaw puzzle that no one has quite found the last piece- the cure- to. As children we do things and expect a consequence of some sort whether good or bad. In life you discover that things aren't always black and white. There are some grey areas in between. Life isn't always defined by the cause and effect scenario. Sometimes you hit those bumps and turns in the road that I mentioned earlier, and they were simply put there by the creator. Not derived from some bad smoking habit, but a challenge that was placed there to be overcome.

I had always pictured myself dying of old age after a long excitement-filled life but in the instant I was faced with the reality of my disease, I pictured death on the operation table, death after rounds of chemotherapy and the loss of all my hair, death in the middle of the night once the cancer had progressed and my body could no longer go on, death as yet another victim of cancer. I saw death as no longer something far off in my future but as a creature waiting to pounce at any moment. I felt vulnerable in my mom's arms and I hated it. I had always been a girl of action. Someone who deals with their own problems and finds the solution. I like to be strong and independent. And yet here I was at the mercy of my doctors.

One day I was the girl playing out her middle school soccer championship and the next I was the center of attention and sympathy. I went from the girl that simply craved happiness and laughter from her peers to the girl that people felt sorry for. I was broken inside and was already

thinking of the eulogy that would be spoken on my behalf. This was simply the actions of a dramatic preteen girl. I had stage one Acinic Cell Carcinoma and was guaranteed survival and a quick recovery, but the word cancer itself held so much more weight to me. I had no warning signs because there was less than a 3% chance of the small mass on my neck actually being malignant. My parents and doctors never even suggested it as a possibility and yet it became my reality.

Despite my parents protests I went to school that day and practically sprinted into the arms of my friends. I sought refuge in the people who carried me through life each and every day. The support I received was a safety net that kept me from falling. The confidence my friends displayed in my recovery motivated me to be strong. I can't remember the exact moment, but at some point I no longer saw the point in crying. Tears only brought dehydration and puffy eyes. Conquering cancer and being brave for the people around me was the attitude I had to take on in this situation. A genuine smile on my face was mirrored in the faces of those around me. This simple gesture helped me to roll out of bed every day and push through my struggles with strength.

I remember being awakened up the day after my diagnosis by car headlights flashing across my bedroom window. I thought it was just people headed to work, but then more and more headlights flashed by and there was a continuous stream of light pouring into my room. It wasn't morning rush hour considering it was 4am and I lived on a one lane road that barely accumulated traffic of any sort. I raced to the window and was amazed to see dozens of candles shining brightly in the darkness. I was unable to make out faces and yet my breath was taken away by the commitment these people, whoever they were, showed towards me and sending me off to my preliminary scans and surgical appointments in Cincinnati. I was shocked to discover

this whole thing was set up by a few of my closest friends. At the age of fourteen none of us could drive so this required planning, carpooling, and dragging parents out of bed to be there for me. In that moment I knew that I wasn't fighting cancer alone, but instead I was fighting alongside my entire community. Prayer circles were dedicated to my fight before sporting events, bands were worn in honor of me, and love was poured out endlessly over my family and me.

I own the survivor shirts and get to celebrate each yearly anniversary I have of being cancer free, but this wasn't something I overcame. I am living, breathing, and walking through life healthy because of the people God put into my life. Without the amazing surgeons, oncologists, nurses, and doctors I came into contact with my story would not be the same. Without my family, friends, and community I may have lost hope and lived in a clouded world of depression. This may have been the most horrific thing I have ever experienced but so many wonderful things have happened as a result. I have been able to share my story at fundraising events, Fellowship of Christian athlete meetings throughout my city, and have even gotten to share my testimony in the third world country of Romania. Tragedy may have struck and thrown me off my course, but I was able to see things in a new life after my surgery and recovery. Life is about living in the moment and never taking advantage of the things we hold most dear to us. Life is finite and everyone's comes to an end at some point, but the impacts you make on other people are the memories that won't be forgotten, not your popularity or the clothing you wear. I want everyone in this world to know they are never alone. Every battle is fought with the people you love the most. Not once did my friends let me put my head down knowing I would have missed the beautiful scenery along the way. Cancer does not define who I am, but the things I do with my life as a result do.

With little known about my cancer and the likelihood of relapse I return routinely for MRI's, X-rays, and CT scans. I am left feeling a little more relieved as more time goes by and more checkups go smoothly. I hit my bump in the road at age fourteen, that big bump that can either throw us off course or wake us up to the journey we are on. I anticipate many more divots and potholes to come, but as of right now I enjoy the smooth road I am on. I look back at the journey I have taken and aspire to be the miracle workers of my life for other children. With hopes and dreams of being an oncologist myself, I want to help tear down those roadblocks and pave over the trenches that keep children from living their life to the fullest. I may not find the cure to cancer but I simply want to be the person a child can turn to when they are at their most vulnerable moment. I want to help families find the light at the end of the tunnel and allow them to keep traveling down the road of life.