

Lucky

By Sofia Nenshi Nathoo, grade 8

That day. That day was supposed to be a normal day. Little did I know, it was going to be the day that changed my life forever.

It started off by my mom getting a phone call. Just like any old day. A mere phone call. I was clearing off the dishes from breakfast, trying to scrub the scrambled egg remains off the plates, when I heard mom's voice.

"Oh, umm...could we maybe come in next week? This week is a little tight for us," her voice trailed off. "Oh...I see. Well today it is then. We will be there in half an hour." She hung up, her face as pale as a ghost.

"Everything okay?" I asked, turning off the tap and walking towards her, a little hesitant as to what her response may be.

"Everything's fine, honey," she replied in what I think was supposed to be a comforting tone. Yet it seemed the exact opposite to me.

"We just have to go in to Doctor Lay's today," she declared as if it wasn't a big deal at all. As if we went to the doctor's office every single day. "They have to run a few tests on you, it won't take long. Go get dressed, alright honey?"

She gave me a light kiss on the forehead and walked up the stairs. I heard her door shut and then the hushed whispers coming from her and dad. That's when I knew for sure that something wasn't right.

I was sweating all the way to the doctor's office that day, my heart beating faster than a galloping cheetah. When we finally made it there, after what felt like an eternity, they did what I would estimate was close to a million tests. Blood tests. That was the worst part. I pinched mom's arm so hard, I saw a deep red bruise when I let go. She didn't seem to mind though and I swear I could see droplets of sweat dripping down her forehead. That sure didn't help with the petrified feeling I had inside me, trying to be shoved far down. Then, before I even had a chance to process, Doctor Lay came back in with a thick stack of papers. The results. That was the single moment that changed everything.

"Jill, honey," she said in that sweet voice of hers, "I have some news for you and your family." She looked over to mom, dad and Katie, my sister, sitting behind her. "It seems that you have been diagnosed with...acute lymphocytic leukemia."

Leukemia? I had heard that word before. But from where? Well, sure enough, that's what I found out next.

“Leukemia,” Doctor Lay continued, “is the most common type of...cancer in kids.”

My heart began to pound out of my chest and my palms became sweaty. Cancer? Me? I felt like I had just hit my head against a brick wall a thousand times. I looked up to see Doctor Lay and my family intensely staring at me and it suddenly became apparent to me that everyone was waiting for my response.

“I...I...I...,” I tried to release the words from my mouth, but they just were not cooperating. “I don’t understand. Am I going to die?” Those last words seemed to make everyone’s eyes widen. I knew it was a harsh question, but it was a question that I needed the answer to.

“No, no, no Jill,” Doctor Lay replied in a quiet voice. “If you and your family agree, you’re going to get treatment and as long as you do as you’re told, everything is going to be fine. Some people don’t even get the chance to receive treatment. You’re very lucky.”

Lucky? Did she really just say that word? How on earth was I lucky? This was the single worst day of my life. Tears stung my eyes. My parents hugged me as Katie draped her warm arm around me.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” my mom said in an uncertain manner. “I’m sure of it.”

“I am going to ask you to put this on. We need to hook you up to some equipment,” Doctor Lay announced as she handed me a grey and white striped gown. I took it with a trembling hand. Now the tears didn’t just sting my eyes, they fell from them. Dad gave me a kiss on the cheek, a sign trying to say that everything would work out. But I just couldn’t believe that.

I went into the bathroom and clutched the gown tightly in my hand. I pinched myself to make sure the whole thing wasn’t a dream. A nightmare. The vilest nightmare of my entire life. But all I felt was an ounce of pain.

I put the gown on and went back out to the room. The room that was originally just like any old doctor’s office. Like the one I had come into two weeks ago for my annual check-up. But now, that room was the biggest and scariest room I had ever seen before. It was a room full of the aura of an unknown future. I sat on the bed as Doctor Lay hooked me up to some machine, and then another one, and another one. I looked up, my eyes filled with panic. I heard what seemed like thousands of pieces of medical equipment beeping at a steady pace. I saw my family holding hands, filled with an abundance of worry and anticipation. I saw Doctor Lay scribbling furiously on a piece of paper with “Jill Flong” written in cursive on the top of it. Just like that, I saw my whole life and everything I was, flash before my watery eyes.

Three months later, I was on my way to my nineteenth chemotherapy appointment. Yup, I do keep an exact count. Nineteenth on the dot. My mom was giving me an endless speech about what happened at work that day.

“But then the best part was when I looked over at him and I was like...,” she started to trail off when she caught a glimpse of me staring aimlessly out the window.

“Hey honey, you okay?” she asked in a concerned tone.

“I guess,” I replied, unconvincingly. “It’s just...Thursday will be my twentieth day of treatment. That’s almost three months of this. I just want it to be over already.”

“I know honey. But I mean you’re so lucky -,”

“Ahhh, mom, you all really need to stop saying that. Oh, look we’re here!” I state abruptly, trying to change the subject.

Mom stopped the car outside the hospital with a screeching halt. “Okay, are you sure you’re good on your own today?”

“I’m fine,” I say. “Love you!” I leaped out of the car and closed the door behind me, eager to get out. I trudged through those same black and white sliding doors where I was greeted by Nurse Lydia. She’s the one who gives me my treatment at every appointment. She’s always waiting for me by the same doors. The same place. The same time. Every single time.

“Hello!” she exclaimed in a high pitched, yet gentle voice. “How are you today, Jill?”

“Okay,” I respond quite curtly. The truth? I wasn’t great at all, but I didn’t want to be a pessimist.

She took me into the treatment room, hooked me up to the machine, and I just sat there for two hours, reading the occasional magazine and eating the little pieces of candy that sat in the communal bowl on the centre table, just thinking about all the other places I could be. Hanging out with Katie, on a hike, at the library, or getting my favorite ice cream from the shop downtown. But no, here I was, spending my Saturday sitting in an uncomfortable chair in a room filled with bright colours and funny posters, trying to cover up the miserable reality underneath. And soon I’ll go home and feel sick, tired and just generally gross until I fall asleep. A typical day.

A few weeks later, I’m spread across my bed, my pink and blue comforter wrapped snugly around me, staring down at the peeling fuchsia pink nail polish on my toes. I pick up “Raymie Nightingale”, the book that I’ve been reading for the last few days off my dark brown, wooden nightstand. Before I get a chance to flip to the page that I’m on, I hear a call from downstairs. It’s mom. I know I have treatment today, but it’s not time yet. Which

means she's calling me for something else, one can only hope that it's happy news this time, to break the pattern. I take my time walking down the stairs, even a trip as short as that can have me gasping for breath nowadays. I reach the bottom of our long-winded staircase to find my parents and Katie staring at me with sorry-filled eyes and just like that, my ounce of optimism that this would be good news flies straight out the window, which slams entirely shut.

"Jill," my mom starts off, "I was just tidying up a bit and I found your toque on the table." She pauses, looks at dad and then continues on, "It um...it has some hair in it. Your hair. I think you might be starting to lose a bit of hair, you know, because of treatment."

Before I had a chance to even comprehend the words that just sprung out of her mouth, dad jumped in.

"But you know honey, this isn't a horrible thing. I mean this tells us that your treatment is working, so you're really very lucky..."

"Just stop!" I say, louder than I was expecting to sound. I snatch the toque out of mom's hands. I start sweating when I see the little strands of hair stuck to the inside of it.

"I'm not lucky and you know it. You all know it! So just stop trying to make me feel better and accept the fact that this is the worst possible thing that could happen to anyone and it happened to me!"

With that, I storm up the stairs and slam my door, the subsequent excruciatingly loud sound making me wince, and just like that, I'm back in my room, Raymie still on my bed, my comforter curled up in a tight ball that resembles the shape of me. I sit on my bed for a good twenty minutes, hat in hand, thinking. Thinking about how everyone could say I'm lucky. Thinking about why this had to happen to me in the first place. Why I had to waste my Saturday's and lose my hair. My thoughts are interrupted when I hear a slight knock.

"Jill?" I hear Katie's quiet voice from outside my thick door. "Can I come in?" She doesn't actually wait for my response and instead opens the door and comes to sit down next to me.

"Of course," I say sarcastically once she's all settled. She chuckles.

"Look," she begins, "I know this is hard, but don't lose it on mom and dad. It's not their fault."

"I know," I reply gloomily. "I feel awful. It's just, you have to understand, I'm so tired of people trying to brighten this up or...or downplay it, or tell me I'm so lucky. This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

Katie looks at me for a minute, and then says, "I know. But mom and dad are just trying to help. We all are." She leans over and gives me a small, yet comforting side hug.

I smile the best I can, which is more of a half frown, but it would have to do.

Katie continues, "We're waiting for you in the car."

I get up off the bed as Katie leaves my room and it's just me again. I grab my backpack out of the closet and shove my book in. As I approach the car, I think about what to say to my parents. Katie was right, they didn't deserve what I said to them. I took my anger and hurt about all of this out on them and that wasn't fair.

"I'm sorry," I say as I enter the car. "I shouldn't have yelled."

"It's okay, honey," my dad replies calmly. "Just remember, we're all in this together."

I appreciated the thought, but the truth was none of them could really know how I was feeling right then. Never.

As we entered the hospital we were all greeted, once again, by Nurse Lydia. But this time, she takes us to a different room.

"Jill," she starts off, "your mom told me what happened."

Typical mom. In the half an hour time gap between when I yelled at her and when I apologized, she managed to call Nurse Lydia and explain the whole situation to her. She's good.

"But look," she continues, "I just want you to know that you're super awesome for putting up with all this. You're a fighter. You know, you're really lucky too."

When I heard that word again, for the thousandth time since this all happened to me, something went off in my head. Almost like an alarm clock. In the course of one second, I forgot my whole conversation with Katie and I snapped again.

"NO!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "No! I'm not! Why can't you all just understand that?" This time, I feel tears flowing down my face.

I get off the couch Nurse Lydia sat us all down on and run out of the room. I run until I'm on the other side of the hospital. The side with all the little kids. I sit down on one of the benches outside a room with a light pink door and try to catch my breath.

That word. It just strikes a chord with me. Why can't anyone understand that I am not lucky? I wipe the waterfall of tears falling from my eyes with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. Then, I hear a noise. It's someone crying. In the light pink door's room.

"Please, please. There must be something you can do!" the woman sobs.

“Ms., I’m so sorry, Emma does have this. Unfortunately, because of her age, treatment will not be available. Once again, I’m so sorry.”

The woman continues to sob, and the only other thing I can hear is her stopping to gasp for air every few seconds. Then the doctor comes out. He closes the door behind him and sighs heavily.

“No, my baby! I’m not going to let anything happen to you, Emma.”

Then more crying. But this time, it wasn’t coming from the woman. It was coming from a smaller voice. The voice of a child. Quiet, tiny cries.

I slowly walk towards the door and lean up against it. For some reason, this hits me harder than I could have ever imagined a stranger crying would. I wanted to know more. I waited by the door for a few minutes, until all I heard was the occasional snuffle. Then, I knocked.

“Come in,” a woman said softly.

I opened the door and poked my head through.

“Hi there,” I said. “I just heard a darling little girl crying and wanted to make sure everything was alright.”

The woman smiled at me in a curious way.

“How sweet,” she replied, obviously a little skeptical of my intentions. “She’s fine. Just a little...scared, I think.”

“Do you mind if I...?” I gesture towards the little girl in the bed, her eyes puffy and red from tears.

“Oh, of course,” the woman says. “Emma, this is...I’m so sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh, I’m Jill,” I reply, feeling a little disappointed in myself that I didn’t say that sooner.

“Amanda,” the woman smiles again as I lean down on one knee by the bed of the little girl. Emma.

“Hi there Emma,” I say in the voice I always talked to kids in. I’ve been told that it’s soft and comforting, yet energetic.

“Snow!” Emma points out the window at the blanket of snow that covers everything in sight.

“Aaah, I’m sorry,” Amanda says with a laugh. “Emma just loves snow.”

“No problem! Me too!” I reply enthusiastically.

“Yeah...,” Amanda's voice gets quiet. “Emma just found out that she has, well...cancer. And she can’t be treated for it. At all.”

My head perks up the minute I hear the word. Those horrendous two syllables. Cancer.

“I’m...I’m so sorry,” I state softly. “I know how you both feel.”

I rubbed my knuckle against the little girl’s forehead and she smiled. The biggest, brightest smile I had ever seen.

“Oh, wow,” Amanda says. “So you...?”

I nod. “But I do have access to treatment. So, I guess I’m very lucky.” I pause. Did I just say that? Say that I was lucky? The very word I had spent months trying not to even think about, let alone utter. I look down at Emma, the little girl who has the same atrocious disease that I have, yet will never have a chance to get better.

“Will you guys be here on Thursday? That’s when I come in next,” I continue.

“Looks like we’re going to be here for a few weeks,” Amanda replies, looking down at Emma.

“Great, well I mean...no. Not great. Just...,” I take a deep breath to stop myself. “Hopefully I’ll be able to come see you guys again.”

“We would love that,” Amanda says with a small chuckle at my awkwardness.

I smile and pull the blanket over Emma. I walk out the door and close it behind me. A million thoughts crowd every corner of my mind. How could this be happening to that sweet, innocent, snow-loving little girl? I walk back to the room where Nurse Lydia and my family are exactly where I left them, still in shock by my behaviour.

“Jill, good,” Nurse Lydia announces. “We’ve been thinking and...”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’m fine. Really.”

“A-Are you sure?” Nurse Lydia asks, curious as to what changed my mind.

“Yeah,” I reply. “I’m sure.”

That whole week I couldn’t take my mind off of Emma and Amanda. I couldn’t take my mind off of what they must have been going through. When Thursday finally rolled around, for the first time in forever, I felt excited to go to the hospital. I met up with Emma and Amanda and we had lunch in the cafeteria before my treatment. They came with me into the bright-coloured room and for the first time, it really did seem bright. A true shade of bright.

After that day, everything changed. I spent all my time at that hospital and even outside of that hospital with Amanda and Emma. I became best friends with Emma, because even though she only knew a few words, we understood each other. I even became close with Amanda. She opened up to me about how she divorced her husband four months ago, and how she wanted to be the mother that Emma needed. How she wanted to always be

there for her, through thick and thin. How she was so scared as to what might happen to her little girl. I assured her that Emma was only okay because of her support. That Emma loved her so much.

Occasionally, if we were all feeling up to it, right before I had my treatment, we would go for hot chocolate and then tobogganing, where Emma would proceed to jump around and throw snowballs at us. Other times, we would just hang out, talk or play with Emma's thousands of toys before or during my treatments. When we weren't doing that, we were constantly on the phone or Facetiming. It was incredible. I even met other cancer patients through the help of Emma's cuteness. They would be obsessed with her and then Emma would come running up to me to introduce us. Thanks to Emma, I got to know Leah, who became a good friend of mine too. She also really got what I was going through, every single piece of it. But most of all, it was Emma. She was the one who was always there for me. Throughout the good and the bad. Her smile could make me laugh on the darkest day. Amanda holding us both in her arms could make everything disappear within seconds. In a way, they became my second family. My partners in crime.

Then the day came. The day that my biggest dream was supposed to be fulfilled and instead turned into my worst nightmare.

Everyone was acting a little strange, but in a good way. Like they were all happy, but trying to hide their happiness from me for some reason.

I was in the treatment room with Katie, my parents, Leah, Amanda, Emma and Nurse Lydia when they told me.

"Well, well, well. Jill, we have some exciting news. Well, actually we have some mega-exciting news. Oh boy, who are we kidding? This is the best news you'll ever get!" Nurse Lydia exclaimed.

"You're done!" my mom blurted out. "Your cancer cells, they're gone!"

I looked up at all of them in utter shock. I froze. It was over. Everything was over. No more treatment. No more hospitals. No more feeling absolutely disgusting for days on end. No more cancer. I was free.

"Oh. My. God. Ahhhhh!" I jumped up from my chair and hugged every single one of them. I was the most overwhelmed I had ever been in my entire life. I laughed as I looked around at everyone, until I met eyes with Amanda, Emma snug in her arms. This day would never come for Emma.

"Ehhh!" Katie squeaked. "Congrats, sis! I'm so proud of you!"

I smiled the biggest, happiest smile ever because if I'm telling the truth, I was proud of myself too.

“Now come with me,” Leah took me by arm into the lounge as everyone trailed closely behind.

“Surprise!” they yelled from behind me as I stepped foot into the balloon and streamer decorated room.

There was a large banner hanging over the mantel that read: “CONGRATULATIONS JILL!”

I chuckled. A room full of decorations and the people who had helped me through the whole journey. More than proud, I felt loved and no feeling could top that.

The whole afternoon and into the night was bound to be the best day ever. We danced, ate cake, talked and laughed for hours on end. And I could have done it for hours more. Then, at around 8:30 p.m., it happened.

“We should totally have matching shirts like this,” Leah said as she showed me a picture from a scrunched-up magazine that she kept in her pocket.

“Definitely,” I replied with a smile.

“Jilly!” Emma called out as she came running up to me. “Jilly, yay!”

I laughed a big laugh at the chocolate surrounding her mouth. “Thank you!” I said as I gave her a kiss on the forehead.

“Whoa,” I continue, “you’re really hot, Em.”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Amanda came running up towards us, “Oh, hey, Em, come on. I think you um...might be feeling a little under the weather.” She tries to keep a smile on her face as she grasps Emma tightly.

“Say ‘bye’ Emma!”

“Bye Jilly girl,” Emma squeals, her voice still high and happy.

I wave goodbye as Amanda escorts her out of the room.

Katie appears beside me. “Hey! Where are Amanda and Emma going?”

I look up. Something didn’t feel right here. Emma didn’t look good at all and obviously Amanda wouldn’t want to tell me if something was wrong on my big night, but I did see her slip away to talk to Doctor Moe, the doctor on call at the hospital, while we were playing with Emma.

“I don’t know,” I reply, my voice filled with worry. “I don’t know. Emma is a three-year-old who has cancer but can’t be treated and she’s not feeling well. None of that points to anything good.”

“Aww, I’m sure she’s fine,” Leah said from behind the chair I was sitting in, giving me a startle. “Don’t worry.”

“No! No, please no! Can’t you do something?” I hear sobs coming from the room across the hall. The same sobs I heard that first day I met Amanda and Emma. Amanda’s devastated sobs.

I sprang into action, my whole body moving as fast as it possibly could. I could tell from the footsteps behind me that everyone was following. I got to Emma’s room and ran in to find Amanda on the floor next to Emma, who had her eyes closed shut.

From the second I saw that picture, I knew what was happening. My heart skipped a beat and my whole body froze. I must have been in a horror movie.

Amanda continued sobbing as I went to put my arm around her and kneel down beside her, still in complete shock, unable to take my eyes off of Emma. Leah, Katie, my parents and Nurse Lydia crowded behind us. Tears flooded my eyes. Then came the long, loud beep. The dreaded beep. The beep that no human being should ever have to hear.

Then, Doctor Moe’s voice. The confirmation.

“Amanda, I’m so sorry, but Emma has, has...,” he cleared his throat, and then continued, “...passed away.”

“No, no, no,” blubbered Amanda.

I wrapped her into a tight hug, my arms holding a woman who was like a mother to me, grieving the loss of her three-year-old daughter. I felt everyone else come up closer behind us. And we stayed there on the ground, beside my best friend, holding each other, hearts broken, crying for hours.

Well, I guess that brings me to today. Two years later. Currently, I’m at the hospital, waiting for everyone to get settled into their seats. I’m doing my first presentation on “What It Means to Have Cancer.” Nurse Lydia thought I would be the perfect speaker and the truth was, maybe I was a good person to speak, but something felt wrong. Something was missing. Like a void inside of me.

“So, without further ado, please welcome Jill Flong!” Dr. Moe’s voice calls me onstage.

“Hi everyone!” I say, looking out at the crowd of people. “So, I’m here today to talk to you about...,” I pause as I see a glimpse of the window out of the corner of my eye. Snow is blanketing everything in plain sight. In March. I laugh. A sign. A sign from the missing part of this evening. A sign from Emma.

I look over at Katie, my parents, Leah, Nurse Lydia and Amanda, who smiles at me. We both know that Emma is here right now, watching me as I do this. Laughing that contagious laugh of hers, smiling that bright smile of hers.

“About what it means to have cancer,” I continue. “I’m a surviving cancer patient.” Everyone cheers so loud, I think I burst an eardrum, but I smile. That’s only one of the hundreds of things I learned from Emma. Always keep smiling.

“Others aren’t so lucky,” I say, glancing towards Amanda. “But the truth is, cancer is about a lot more than just treatment and doctors. It’s about the people you go through it with. The ones who are there with you from the beginning... and the ones you meet along the way. It’s about realizing that no matter what happens, there is always going to be someone less fortunate than us out there. Sometimes that person may be a stranger, other times they may be a loved one.”

I look out the window and remember the first time I saw Emma and then the last time. “Sometimes, it’s these loved ones who have to be the ones to push us to realize that even though we have cancer and even though we feel like our whole world is collapsing all around us, we’re really...,” my voice trails off as I think about Emma. My best friend. She knew she was lucky until the very end. If there was one thing I could give to all these people, watching me, waiting for me to say something that would ease their suffering, it would be the gift of Emma. But she wasn’t here. So instead, I give them the best lesson Emma ever taught me.

“We’re really lucky,” I continue. “Every single one of us.”