Purple Strands

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On October 13, 2021, I left Vanderbilt campus for fall break not knowing I would not be returning to finish the semester.

Two weeks prior, I had become increasingly sick. I was running out of breath while walking to class, sweating profusely at night, and unable to sleep lying down. With concerns of pneumonia, I visited an urgent care clinic. We agreed to conveniently schedule a CT scan for my first day of fall break. However, as my symptoms became better in the days leading up to the scan, I was no longer worried about my condition. Before I spoke with my family doctor about the scan results, I was frustrated that I had to wait so long to be told "everything is fine" and that I could go about my day.

When my doctor finally sat down in the room with me, he was hesitant to say much. He spent a moment beating around the bush, making small talk. His indirectness was oddly out of character. When I asked about the scan, he stopped talking. Our eyes met. My usually jocular physician was frowning, clearly at a loss for words. With confidence in my renewed health, I found it laughably ironic that all these social cues hinted towards the notion that something was wrong.

"The CT scan showed that there are tumors in your neck."
My nonchalant attitude quickly faded and my anxiety
spiked. I took a deep breath.

"Okay," I said.

I knew it could not be bad. *I am healthy,* I thought. *Tumors can be benign*.

"Do you think it's malignant?"

"Yes," he responded, with a heaviness in his voice. "I am worried you have lymphoma."

At that moment, I experienced an immense amount of dread. Time had stopped.

I will never have a girlfriend. I will never finish my degree.

I will never move away from home. I will never have children.

In a fraction of a second, nothing in my life mattered anymore.

During my childhood, in pursuit of fulfillment, education was the clearest path. Whereas I was too awkward to thrive socially and not athletic enough for sports, I knew I was smart enough to get good grades and determined enough to make my effort worthwhile.

Tunnel-visioned on my studies, I followed this narrow path throughout high school and set my sights on America's top universities. Coming from a district with scarce resources, my dream was a steep hill to climb. Without academic counselors or family members with backgrounds in elite education, I had taken it upon myself to pave my own academic path. I gave up sleep, social life, and extracurriculars to optimize my academic performance. Of course, that meant my teenage hood was rather unfulfilling outside of grades and awards. In theory, however, my troubles and labor would all eventually pay off. Eventually, I could conduct groundbreaking research or land a phenomenal job with a salary that my parents would envy.

The instant realization that all my work was for nothing was crippling. For 19 years, I had lived life wrong.

When time resumed, the only question I could articulate was, "Will I lose my hair?"

My long, purple hair had been my identity throughout the entirety of my teenage years. Growing up in rural Tennessee, my hair was a modest act of defiance against the conventions of a religious, middle-class upbringing. It was proof to the world of my autonomy. By the age of 19, the image of my purple strands flowing in the wind was inseparable from my character. When the doctor affirmed my fears, I understood that regardless of the success of treatment, part of me was going to die.

For the first time in years, I sobbed.

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The following two weeks comprised the most stressful period of my life. In addition to the prospect of cancer and the uncertainty of my prognosis, I had to decide if I was able to resume my studies. In the past four years, I had worked relentlessly to optimize my academic path.

Often, I would daydream of being able to say I got my master's by 20. Unfortunately, the credits from my associate degree did not transfer to Vanderbilt and I had already delayed my graduation by two years. Taking medical leave would be an additional step backward. After years of obsessing over efficiency, the thought of stagnation was gut-wrenching.

When fall break ended, I was unable to return due to a surgical biopsy. Blood tests ruled out the other feasible explanations for my symptoms, one by one. As my return to school continued to be delayed, assignments were piling up and my anxiety skyrocketed. To me, missing school was a blatant breach of character. At the same time, I was paralyzed by both the terror of dying and the apathy toward living in the meantime. How could I focus on that week's homework when it was uncertain whether I would be alive by the end of the semester anyway?

Finally, my oncologist confirmed the news: I did indeed have cancer, and I needed to start chemotherapy immediately. As dreadful as this was to hear, it provided a strange kind of relief. I now had an excuse to free myself of the guilt of missing school. I made the decision to withdraw from the fall semester of my sophomore year.

Disappearing from university without being able to explain why to my classmates was surreal. Outside of my roommate, I had no friends to tell that I would be gone. To anyone else who might recognize me at Vanderbilt, I was simply the guy with purple hair who stopped going to class. I asked myself incessantly whether the classmates I thought about were thinking of me. The girl I talked to every day in my Chinese class would likely never know why I suddenly disappeared, which was deeply troubling.

As my oncologist briefed me on the details of my treatment, the reality of my situation set in. Given the extreme toxicity of the drugs in my chemotherapy regimen, I had a port surgically installed into my chest to lower the risks of administering poisons into my bloodstream.

Surviving treatment was no guarantee. Even if I made it through chemotherapy, its long-term effects were gravely discouraging. One drug in my regimen–dubbed the "red devil"–would inflict irreversible damage on my heart. Another drug could render me deaf and potentially infertile for life. My hope to ever live a normal life again dissipated with each new side effect I learned of. I could not help but feel a cruel sense of unfairness. *Eighty-year-olds get cancer.*

Why should a child have to fear for their life? Why did that child have to be me?

I began to resent myself for not living a normal life while I had the chance to do so. I could have spent my first few semesters at college meeting friends. I could have attained the social life that I had deprived myself of throughout high school. Instead, I failed. Now I was forced to undergo cancer alone.

Going into treatment, I was optimistic that I could handle it. While my stage was considered advanced, my prognosis indicated I was within the window of curability. The mortality rate for my chemotherapy was 20%, but I was a child compared to the sample of elderly patients. Even though I knew the following few months would be dreadful, I reassured my parents the night before my first treatment. I had convinced myself that I was ready for the rigors of chemo.

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I will forgo writing a thorough recount of the ten days following my first treatment as I do not wish to relive a moment from that timeframe.

Suffice to say, my condition spiraled out of control. By the end of the first week, I was hospitalized with neutropenic typhlitis. Statistically, the odds of survival were a matter of a coin flip. A few days into my hospitalization, my parents were told that the infection had

entered my bloodstream. They were afraid I was going to die. No amount of narcotics could ease my physical pain. During the brief moments of cognizance that I had in my hospital bed, I felt immense disappointment, believing that everything was ending so pointlessly. I would amount to nothing more than a teenager with potential.

After a grim week in the hospital, I made a miraculous turnaround, just in time for my second treatment. While the worst was out of the way, the following months of chemotherapy were agonizing. Throughout the first half of chemo, I was a victim of my own body as the drugs convinced my organs to turn on themselves. Life during this time was a never-ending migraine. Even the slightest sight or sound was intolerable. I spent entire days hiding under the blankets in a dark room. Every conscious moment was lived in discomfort. Every hour was an inescapable meditation on mortality. When I closed my eyes, I feared I would not wake up. With pain so severe that I could not sleep without opioids, there were times when I did not want to.

Losing my hair was crushing. To this day, I cannot shower without reliving the moment I wiped my eyebrows off my face and the tears that followed. Throughout the rest of the treatment, I would meet my face in the mirror with a look of disgust. I did not see the purple-haired academic powerhouse that was myself. I saw a frail, sickly child whose appearance mimicked a depilated vampire more than it did a human. Stripped of my identity, I was left solely with my inner thoughts, which I felt slipping further each day into a chemo-induced brain fog. More than anything, I was lonely—not even accompanied by myself.

Through that year of battling cancer, what I wanted out of life changed. Prior to the diagnosis, academics was the sole focus of my ambition; the only course for attaining a fulfilling life. I realized that, for the first time in my life, I craved relationships. I wanted to live a life where I had people to talk to every day. I wanted to be healthy enough to see people face-to-face again. If I had the chance to return to college, I did not want to continue to neglect my social life under the guise of a promising future, as that is evidently anything but guaranteed.

Fortunately, after five months of chemotherapy and fifteen rounds of radiation, I finally got my chance. My treatment ended last June, my scans were clear in July, and I returned to Vanderbilt in August.

After I moved back to campus, I opened my backpack for the first time since the previous October. As I was shifting through the notes from my previous semester, strands of purple hair fell out from between the pages of the binder. I was reminded that I was not the same person I used to be, and I would not make the same mistakes.

Today, I live knowing that, given the nature of my disease, the cancer can return at any time. If I resume treatment, it will be stronger and harder to endure than my previous regimen. Given how I fared during my initial treatment, there is no guarantee I will survive it again. I

have no other option but to make the most of the present, as it might be all that I have. Last year taught me I am not satisfied with just being alive. I am determined to live.