Young Writer's Day Competition- Final Entry. "For Him"

I could leave. Get up from this chair. Walk off. I could stop listening, not that I am anyway. My ear is open like a door, my brain isn't so welcoming. It's understandable. Who'd want to be present for this? The whole family, obviously. Instead of us joining to capture a memorable moment, we're tied to our seats.

"And how long? How long will he still be with us?" asks Aunty Joy. What's the point Joy? You aren't a doctor, you can't save him.

The Doctor looks down at the green carpet, avoiding eye contact, sweat emerging beneath his plaid shirt. "We aren't sure, not long." Gasps attempt to be masked. Attempt failed. The Doctor continues, I phase out. I could never be a Doctor; patients, endless nights, blood, fetid smells, dealing with families that believe they can save their loved one. Save them with something they read online, with a prayer and incense, or anything that shines the smallest ray of light bright enough to blind them with denial of the truth. They can't save him.

"When it comes to..." He pauses. What would be a light way to say your grandfather will die? The Doctor looks experienced, he'll find a nice little phrase to blunt the sinister spear sliding at everyone, "... the end," he continues, "Benjamin's breathing will become clearer." My light brown eyes look up to scan the room, meeting no other eye contact. Instead, I count the number of slacking shoulders, everyone recalling Ben's breathing; a bubbling boil of mucus and phlegm. I figured it'd be a comforting change if Ben's breathing changed, if the fog cleared and the sticky, spongy sound subsided, then I realised it wouldn't. If his breathing changed from how it was now it'd mean the end. He'll be gone forever.

I look over at Pat and Kent to my left, playing with their trains. They're too young, they won't remember, they'll cry when it happens, but won't mourn like we do. They won't be uncontrollably angry like a teenager. Their anger won't sneak into every remark they make or destroy any thought of happiness they have.

I'll know, I'll always remember being told Benjamin'll die, that we're powerless. We are powerless, we can't do anything, it's his time. We're trying to hold onto water.

My legs find the rebellion before my brain does. I storm out. I can't stand this, this place, this talk. I'm at the front of a crowd of fifteen. Aunts, uncles, cousins, Mum, Dad, sister and brother. Uncle Clarke arrived from America only a few days before. Pat and Kent greeted him with strangling hugs and embraces in hopes of receiving their souvenirs earlier than the others, my older cousins and I gave the courtesy hug. Pat and Kent may have thought Uncle Clarke was here for a visit, but we -the older ones, the young adults- knew, we understood. He was here to say goodbye.

My mother sits next to me, holding back tears. When I stand her white hand immediately clamps my wrist. Her eyes speak the words her mouth won't let her. Don't leave Sammy, she communicates, I need you just like you need this. I don't reply so subtly.

"I-- I can't mum." And I walk off. Out of the room full of books, toys, physiotherapy chairs and television, the room clawing at me with temptation and distraction. I won't let it. I stride down the white corridors decorated with plaques commending palliative care for their outstanding work, and asymmetrical drawings from children. Thanks palliative care, I think, thanks for making my grandfather comfortable as he dies.

I turn to the right and realise I've walked straight into Benjamin's room. I enter wild like a tiger, angry at people comforting me, pitying me, then I see him and only him. I am tamed. Lying on the bed, immobile, breathing irregular and somehow comforting. The sound is disturbingly beautiful, it means he's alive, still here. I move a chair from under the high sink in the opposite corner and move it to the right side of his bed. The bed breathes, powered by machinery circulating blood around Ben's body. I sit, gingerly, acting the way Ben'd want me to.

Stephanie Penaías
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He never wanted his grandchildren to call him ‘Pops’ or ‘Grandpa’ Ben liked being called Ben. He was at conserving his youth, as was his constant joking. He used to joke about getting married again, to a young girl, and more importantly how easily he'd woo her.

Tears threaten to weaken me at the memory of him. I bite my lip and force myself to be strong. For him. I struggle to wedge my hand under his, and I realise how cold he is. He’s still alive, I tell myself. My warm blood under his icy cold, slowly stirring. He's so still. He hasn't spoken in weeks. I don't even know if he remembers me. My thumb strokes his hand.

"Hi," I manage to say. I look down. My brain floods with memories of him. I was five, rocking the bob cut with the front fringe, still chubby. I'm on his back, clinging around his neck and waist, and he's running through the backyard. I'm scared, but he's there. He still had a strong back then, able to run, jump, throw and catch me. I was scared and he caught me. I remember the fright, fearing that I'd fall, that I can't do anything but fall, that I'm paralysed by the effects of gravity, then he catches me.

He can't do that now. Now his children hold him up to go to the bathroom and the grandchildren watch. I watch, motionless.

"Please" I mutter, "Please... don't leave." And I'm crying. Great. Firstly, I'm crying because I'm angry, angry. I got tears on his sheets, angry I prayed to God and He isn't helping, angry at myself for even thinking such a thing. "I want to be angry. I want to scream, but I know that isn't what you want." You want me to be good and behaved. "Please." I plead.

"Sammy?" I turn around and mother is there. She comes behind my chair and wraps her arms around me, I rest my palm against one of them. That's when I knew any strand of control I thought I still had was gone. I can't control it and let it go, of it all; tears, emotions.

"It's alright. This happens, it's life." She attempts to comfort me.

"Why can't it go back Mum? Why can't he be back?" I sound like a child, wanting something I can't have. "Screw cancer." I then say. Mum lets the swearing slide.

"Change happens, Sam. You can't stop it. We never know," she then adds in a cheerful voice cloaked in a lack of faith, "he could get better." Unlikely, I think. "Or..."

"Or he could die." I finalise, striving for bravery.

"Or that," Mum continues. "Cancer does suck, but Ben'll need to go. It's a dance to a different tune."

"I don't like this tune." I say. Maturity levels lowering, I think to myself. Even though I can't see her face, I can hear my mother crying as she says,

"Me neither Sweetie," she holds on tighter. "Me neither."

Days later, I'll wake at 4:38 am to my mother screaming.

"He's gone!"

We drive, silent, comforting mother, Ben's daughter. It's her turn to be a child. A mother's true strength is her freedom of emotions around her children.

We arrive at the palliative care centre, rush to the room, enter and stand still. Everyone stares with eyes glassy from tears. My mother's sister rushes to her, brothers and sisters hug their cousins, and I stay still. Something then tugs on my leg. I look and bend down to Pat.

"Yes, Pat?" I say as strongly as I could.

"Where did Ben go? Can I go too?" Innocent and sweet, that is what hurts, that I'll have to lie so he can learn about change later on, when he's ready.

"Ben is..." I pause. The anger is gone. So is Ben. "He's on a side of a door we can't open yet. You can go when you're older."

"And Ben'll be there?" Pat adds cheerfully.

"Yes," I smile through tears, "He'll be there."
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"I miss him." Pat says, and I hug him tightly, wishing he'd never grow up to know the truth about death, the ultimate change, nor the experience of cancer.
"I miss him too."

Change. Everything involves change. The day didn't get brighter, instead became dark with torrential rain. The room filled more and more with faces falling to the knees of emotions. We stayed till night. Outside, the sky sprinkled with stars. One shined brighter that the others, I smiled at it. He's never gone, I think, that'll never change. I'll be on his back again one day, he'll catch me when I fall again. He's my grandfather, my Ben. That'll never change.

- Stephanie Penailes, Yr. 10. Mount Carmel High School, Varrovville.