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Light in the Darkest Times

I've always hated the rain. But all my life living in the outskirts of Seattle, Washington, I can't afford to hate the rain. It's a constant daily loop of downpour and you would think I would be used to it by now, but no. That might be the only thing I hate about living in Seattle, other than the traffic. Living in Seattle all my life has brought me a secure group of friends, who I've known basically all my life. Living in the same area as me, me and my friends attended the same elementary, middle, and high schools, and all staying connected ever since we were tiny 3rd graders playing tag at recess. Seattle has brought me to my high school, Greenbrook High, which I now love. In middle school, many upperclassman warned me that high school is a traumatic, scary place, and that I should be afraid to step foot into the halls, but now being a senior, I haven't found any of that true. I love my high school. I'm doing well in classes, my GPA is pretty great, and I'm involved in clubs that I love, along with teachers that I love even more. I couldn't be happier living in Seattle, with the final reason being it brought me to Isabella. Me and Isabella have been dating all four years of our high school experience, basically growing up together. We've been through the ups and the downs, and unlike the Seattle rain, I don't know what I would do without her. Isabella puts up with my jokes, laughs every once and a while, and surprisingly never gets sick of me.

Something we both shared in common was our future goals. I had always grown up wanting to be a doctor, specifically a surgical doctor, and Isabella wants to be an

anesthesiologist. We both have a strong passion for medicine, which just happened to have influenced how we met. In 9th grade, when we both decided to walk into Room 204, Mr. Blake's after school medicine class, called HOSA. We both wanted to get more involved in the school, and since we both shared a passion for medicine, this was the perfect club. Four years ago, I distinctively remember a girl, who I thought was out of my league, sitting down and asking my name, and then the rest is history.

This HOSA class became a big part of my high school experience. The teacher, Mr. Blake, a science teacher and an after school HOSA advisor, was and still is such a role model for both me and Isabella. Mr. Blake had watched me and Isabella grow up, and he had been there for us throughout pretty much everything. Whether it was schoolwork problems, family problems at home, or just life in general, he was always there to lend a helping hand or an ear for listening. He became our favorite teacher at Greenbrook High.

Now, four years later, me and Isabella both walked into room 204, sitting in the same front row seats we have been ever since we were tiny freshman, waiting for Mr. Blake to come into the classroom and start the club meeting.

Mr. Blake strutted into the room, with a coffee in his hand and a copy of last week's medical magazine, *The Glove*. He made eye contact with me and Isabella immediately, us knowing we're his favorite students in the club.

"Good afternoon to my favorite club, I hope everyone had an amazing school day." Mr. Blake said loudly. Isabella and I know that's how he always starts off the club, considering it hasn't changed in four years.

The class all mutters back simultaneously "Good afternoon, Mr. Blake."

“Hey Dylan, how was that Biology test you stressing out about last week? Did you get your grade back?” Mr. Blake asked me optimistically, while walking over to his desk.

“Yeah... turns out all along I had no reason to be stressed, I got handed a paper with a bright 95 on it.” I told him proudly.

“See, I told you, science has always been your best subject, kid.” Mr. Blake told me as he gave me a high five.

“Alright class, today we’re going to talk about preparing for our upcoming state conference we have this month. Get together in your small groups and start brainstorming presentation ideas for the competition.” Announces Mr. Blake.

State HOSA convention was something I looked forward to every year. You get to share your views on a medical issue and I always have the strongest opinions, so being able to get them out every year is so enjoyable for me. The class went by as any other normal class would. We did some research, made some jokes with Mr. Blake, and then the clock struck 4 o’clock and the class was over. These classes always fly by. Even though we meet every day after school, honestly this club could last longer and I wouldn’t even mind.

“We’ll see you tomorrow Mr. Blake.” Isabella and I stated, while walking out of the class knowing we’ll be right back in those seats tomorrow.

Isabella and I did our daily after class routine. We go to our nearest local coffee shop to try and knock out some homework, which usually ends in her laughing at my stupid jokes, that only she would laugh at. We distract each other from studying but I wouldn’t change a thing. I drove her home and we said our goodbyes for the day, hopefully both being able to get some homework done now that we’re apart.

The next day, after school, all of the club members shuffle into room 204 at promptly 3 o'clock. We did our normal routine, chit-chatting while waiting for Mr. Blake to come start the class.

Mr. Blake walked into the classroom without saying his usual opening 'Good afternoon' line. I could tell something was off. Out of all four years I have known him, he has never started a class off by saying anything else. It was his daily catchphrase we all looked forward to.

"Alright class, even though we usually have chill classes, today I'm going to have to get a little bit more serious... I wanted to tell you guys, because I feel like it is important that you all know. I don't want you to worry, but I have been diagnosed with lung cancer." Softly stating Mr. Blake.

The class went silent. Just like that, in the span of a 10-minute class introduction, we got news that affected every single one of us in that class.

"I have been diagnosed for around two years, and have tried every traditional cancer treatment there is, and nothing has worked." He continued.

I turn my head and see a few tears come out of Isabella's eyes. I hate to see her cry. But it's harder to console her when I'm holding back tears myself. I put my hand on top of hers while we waited to see what other horrible news could possibly utter from Mr. Blakes mouth. Isabella wiped her tears from her cheek and spoke up.

"Well... but.. what are you.. what is there to... what are you going to do now?" She stuttered.

"Well I have a couple options." He said to Isabella. "There are a couple of experimental cancer treatments that I would be willing to try, except my current health insurance does not

cover them. So being able to afford that would be a battle. Other options are continuing the traditional treatment and praying for a miracle” Mr. Blake explained.

“You have to try the experimental treatments!” Isabella insisted, while the class all muttered in agreement.

“I wish it was that easy Isabella” He said pessimistically.

“Well why won’t insurance cover it? Don’t they know it might have a chance of working? Why are they even hesitating if it could help!” Isabella furiously stated.

“Well you see, with experimental treatments, many health insurance companies deny coverage because they are not confident that it will work, so they don’t want to risk their coverage on it. But unlike me, I’m confident. I have to have hope that something will work, and I have to stay positive.” Mr. Blake said.

The mood of the whole class changed. For the rest of the day no one was talking about the state conference competition. No one was worried about what they would present, no one was worried about frankly anything besides Mr. Blake and if he was going to be okay.

We walked out of the class; without the same joy we usually do. I sat with Isabella on the outside benches for a little bit, knowing today would not be the day for jokes and after school study sessions. I know the class took it hard, but Isabella and I took it more personal. We loved Mr. Blake, and to see anything bad happen to him, it tore us apart.

“Well we have to do something! I mean anything. We need to fundraise and get donations and try everything we can so he can get those experimental procedures!” Isabella cried.

I saw the hope in her eyes. She wanted to help so badly, because that's the type of person she is. The odds of us, two small high school kids, being able to raise enough money to pay for a cancer treatment... It sounded absurd, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

"Of course we can." I said as I tried to comfort her. "We will have to come up with something to help, we *will* do something." I promised to her.

I drove her home that day, skipping our usual coffee date, skipping our usual laughs. Today wasn't the day. I dropped her off and went home to my normal life. I sat in my bed. *Why do these things happen to good people?* I thought to myself. *Mr. Blake's life had been nothing but great, so why?* I guess some of these questions would never be answered.

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The next day, we went to school, just a casual Thursday afternoon. It was raining harder than normal, which automatically puts a damper on my day.

I walked into my study hall class and saw the back of Isabella's head, her long black hair, draped over the back of the chair, searching for something on the computer. I walk up behind her and see that she's researching something. It's a long medical article on hypothermia therapy experimental Cancer treatment. I came up behind her and started talking and she jumped as if she was startled.

"Holy crap you scared me!" Isabella proclaimed.

"Ha, I'm sorry" I said, as I kissed the top of her head. "What're you doing?"

"I'm researching some of the experimental treatments that Mr. Blake was talking about. There's so much I didn't know about them. Even if we can't do anything for Mr. Blake, I think I have another idea, just to promote awareness for these programs." As Isabella tried to explain to me.

She continued going on about her ideas. “Maybe for our HOSA competition, we could do our presentation on experimental surgeries, and how health insurances don’t cover most of them.”

“I think that has some potential. The auditorium will be so big, and our message would reach so many people. And maybe, just maybe, I have an idea that could help Mr. Blake a little more than just simply a presentation.” I told Isabella.

We started researching everything and anything. We looked at all of the experimental treatments that could help Mr. Blake or help anyone battling cancer in general. More than half of these treatments were foreign to us, and if it had the possibility of curing this horrible disease, why would someone not give it a try. We did research and took note of the most effective experimental treatments, and whether a good amount of insurance companies would cover them or not. If they wouldn’t cover the treatment, like Mr. Blake’s insurance, why wouldn’t they? Where the treatments not successful with results, or did the insurance company just not want to risk it? We learned everything and anything we could about this topic.

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A couple days later, about three HOSA meetings went by. Everyone slowly started to forget about the life altering announcement that Mr. Blake had made and went back to their normal routine. Isabella and I had made huge advancements on our project, and it was coming along quite well. Mr. Blake knew we were doing our project to raise awareness for the health insurance issues when it comes to more than just traditional treatments, but he didn’t know the extra bit I had prepared for the conference.

About a week later it was competition day. We packed up our presentation board, our computers, and headed our way to the Washington State Convention Center. Although it was a state convention, it being held in Seattle made the drive relatively quick for us. The energy was somewhat low for certain people, all of us praying that this was not Mr. Blake's last conference. Even though we all knew about Mr. Blake's disease, we tried to stay positive and have a good competition for this year. We all loved competition day. Everyone in the class had a passion for medicine, and this let us put it to the test. When we all arrived at the convention center, Mr. Blake gave one of his usual peppy speeches, as if he wasn't the one being affected by cancer. If someone walked by and heard his speech, you would've never guessed that anything was wrong in his life. He stayed optimistic and didn't put any of his worries out into the world.

"Alright, I want every single one of you to go out there and kill it! And I have no doubt in the world that you won't. Because anyways, you were all taught by the best HOSA teacher there every was... me, obviously." Mr. Blake joked.

We all laughed. Leave it to Mr. Blake to be cracking jokes at this time in his life. But anyways, his speech got all of our spirits up, and we all knew we would go out there and do the best we could. We all walked backstage with our presentations, patiently waiting to present. Isabella and I were next.

We presented our project on experimental treatments. I explained all of the options, and the fact that sometimes insurance doesn't cover these treatments, even though they could help. We explained that traditional treatments don't work for everyone, and that if these treatments could give a cancer patient hope, and the possibility to live a healthy life again, they should be more well-known and funded so that patients can try these procedures, without going into so much debt that consists of losing basically everything in their life. We were proud of it. During

the end of our presentation, we took a small amount of time for our own. I tapped the microphone on, and nerves hit me. I wasn't nervous throughout the whole presentation, but suddenly, my body was overcome with anxiousness. I knew I was going to be bound to show emotion, which was hard for me, but I couldn't get through what I was about to say without it.

"Good afternoon everyone, along with this presentation, I'd like to introduce you to our amazing advisor, Mr. Blake." I said proudly to the crowd of doctors and teachers and students.

Mr. Blake stood up, and everyone clapped. When the clapping died down, I went on to say what I had been practicing for days.

"Now Mr. Blake not only has been an amazing teacher, but he has had a personal effect on me and Isabella here. He has been our HOSA advisor for 4 years, and our friend for 4 also. We both would have never survived high school without him, he was always there for advice and guidance. Mr. Blake has personally touched every one of our lives, and without him, I probably would not have the courage to go for my dreams of becoming a doctor. With our presentation, we can relate it to Mr. Blake. A couple months ago, Mr. Blake announced to the class that he was diagnosed with lung cancer, and no traditional treatments were working."

I stopped for a second, when I noticed my voice was crackling, as I was choking back some tears. I took some deep breaths, collected myself, and continued.

This right here is our small contribution, because even though there is not a lot two senior kids from Seattle can do, we felt the need to do something. My fellow classmates will be coming around to your rows with donation bins, please, if you or someone you know has personally been affected by cancer, you will understand. You can donate towards Mr. Blake's cause, or choose not to, either one is still appreciated. Thank you all so much."

I started to look around the auditorium in the middle of the abundant amount of cheers and claps, everyone was donating. The amount of money that was flowing in was insane. A whole auditorium of important people were donating, caring for our cause, and wanting Mr. Blake to fight. It was heartwarming.

We did not expect the amount of money and attention that our presentation created. Afterwards, we were bombarded by people asking if there was any way to share this cause. There was a camera crew for the local news, nothing big at all, but still it was amazing to see how many people were generous enough to help our cause. We told the camera woman who recorded our story that we'd set up an online donation site soon, if anyone who was watching the local news that day felt the need to donate.

We got back to the school, around 9 pm, to look at all of the money we had collected. We rummaged through all of the buckets. Some 1-dollar bills, some 20's, some 100's, and even checks for up to 500 dollars.

"Gosh... I mean seriously kids, I'm speechless." Mr. Blake said in a softly. You could hear the sincerity in his voice. "You all planned this? For someone with cancer, I can truly say I am lucky. I'm so lucky to have each and every one of you. Even if the maximum amount we raised was 5 dollars, just the thought that you all cared enough to do this... seriously speechless."

There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

"And I want to say a special thank you to Dylan and Isabella. You guys really are amazing." Mr. Blake said with a smile.

"Yeah... we know." I joked back with him.

"Alright, let's count this money... and someone needs to make that online donation page!" Isabella proclaimed, as she got right into work mode.

“I’m on it!” One of our classmates yelled.

While some people were working on counting the money, and others were trying to get the webpage up and running, I realized how proud of myself I should be. I was so excited to even be a part of helping Mr. Blake, for it was the least I think I could have done. I went over to Isabella and embraced her in a hug for a solid five minutes. I was so proud of us, and so proud of her too. Her passion for helping people and the care that she has was one of the reasons I fell in love with her.

Later that week in class, we found out we raised enough money to cover a little more than half of what a treatment would cost for Mr. Blake, and he told us that his insurance would most likely be able to cover the rest. He said that if there were proven results with the treatment, his insurance would be more likely to cover more of it.

I was ecstatic. I looked over to the side, and I see tears falling down from Isabella’s face, except this time I was not concerned for her, knowing that they were nothing but happy tears. I’ve always hated the rain. But for some people, I would willingly put up with the rain for the rest of my life. Isabella and Mr. Blake are two of those people.