

Darkness & Light

Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light.

~John Webster

My boys giggled and splashed in the crowded pool, taking refuge from the bright August sun. Their latest pool games involved squirters and cannonballs. The carefree vibrant scene was a stark contrast to the dark and crippling words echoing through my cell phone.

“The CT scan showed a mass on your father’s pancreas,” my mom said as she struggled to get out the words. My tall, strong fifty-nine-year-old father had suddenly started losing one to two pounds per day. Of all the possible causes I’d read about, this was the worst imaginable scenario. The deadliest of all major cancers, the pancreatic-cancer prognosis was horribly grim. Most patients don’t live a year beyond diagnosis, with many taken in just three to six months.

After marrying young and working hard their entire lives, my parents were looking forward to retiring, traveling and spending time with their grandchildren: my sons, Kyle and Tyler, ages eight and four, and my brother’s daughters, Kaitlyn and Audrey, ages nine and six.

It was a devastating diagnosis.

The first oncology appointment was on my boys’ first day of school. Second grade and preschool were to be exciting school years that their beloved Pop wanted so desperately to see. Every year on each grandchild’s birthday, he’d make a video highlight reel of the past year, and he was already hard at work planning a baseball theme. My dad and my boys shared a passion for baseball. Kyle earned a spot on the travel baseball team and would be starting in the spring. Tyler knew all the names and stats of Pop’s beloved Philadelphia Phillies.

My dad asked his oncologist if he would make it to Christmas. After reviewing the scans showing an inoperable tumor, the doctor pursed his lips and said with deeply apologetic eyes, “I’m sorry, Fred. Probably not.”

Since my mom was a teacher, with limited time off, I often accompanied my dad to chemotherapy. My brother, Mark, met us during his lunch break. We marveled as Dad sat there, hooked up to the IVs, chatting with the nurses. As a college professor, my dad loved hearing about their educational backgrounds, and they adored his pleasant demeanor. He made it easy to forget the grave reason we were there.

After the initial infusion at the hospital, he remained on chemotherapy for forty-eight hours in the form of a backpack with tubes hooked up to his chest port. We’d visit him at home, armed with movies and board games so he could relax. But before long, we’d find him in the driveway with the kids, pitching and chasing fly balls while wearing his chemo backpack!

During one infusion at the hospital, he decided that instead of fearing the Christmas holiday he might not live to see, he would plan to celebrate it in the biggest way possible. Forty years prior, during Christmas week, my parents had honeymooned in Disney World. In honor of this anniversary, he wanted to take all of us there to celebrate Christmas. Traveling posed health risks to his immune-compromised body. I planned

cautiously, packed secretly, and hoped. Knowing it was possible the trip wouldn't happen, we all agreed not to tell the kids until we were sure. Days before Christmas they awoke thinking it was an ordinary school day. Instead, we all met at my parents' house for the ultimate Christmas surprise.

Joyfully, my dad told his grandchildren that their suitcases were in the car and we were heading to the airport.

A family friend and former Disney employee arranged to have our room at the Pop Century Resort decorated with anniversary greetings and instructed us to view the parade in a particular spot.

We rode rides and laughed with Disney characters in the beautiful Florida sun. My dad had no hair and limited energy, but he wore a Disney button that declared proudly, "I'm Celebrating LIFE." The brightly lit park sparkled as pretend snow fell, and the kids danced around us, catching snowflakes on their tongues. At last, Santa concluded the parade in a spectacular sleigh. As he rode by, he shouted for the entire crowd to hear, "I want to wish a very special Merry Christmas to the very special Loomis family" as he called each one of us by name. It was a magical memory from a most magical trip.

But the magic didn't end there.

My dad survived six months post-diagnosis to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. We planned a surprise baseball-themed party and gathered friends from his childhood, college and career. Extended family traveled from around the country to be there. We told him to arrive in costume for "a baseball team fundraiser." Dressed head to toe in his favorite Phillies pinstripe uniform, my dad was surprised by "Fred's Fans" wearing baseball gear for an evening of his favorite ballpark food. At the end of the night, he stood up to quote baseball legend Lou Gehrig. He said that he might have been given a "bad break... Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth."

But we were the lucky ones because he continued to choose happiness.

That spring, he attended every one of Kyle's baseball games with his chemo backpack. I thought it was going to disconnect when he jumped out of his seat to cheer as Kyle hit a walk-off single to win the district championship game!

The following year, he planned a Thanksgiving feast at Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge to celebrate all that we had to be grateful for. The next trip was to an indoor waterpark for his sixty-second birthday, where he and all four grandchildren boarded raft after raft, screaming while soaring down the thrilling tube slides. The following year, we all shared a house in Ocean City, New Jersey, a favorite childhood destination. He'd start each morning with a bike ride down the boardwalk, each afternoon splashing in the waves with the kids, and each night on the boardwalk with ice-cream cones and laughter.

Despite fifty-five chemo treatments and five weeks of daily radiation over the course of two-and-a-half years, the pancreatic tumor never shrank, and it spread to his liver. He was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic pancreatic cancer, and the five best cancer hospitals on the East Coast all deemed his tumor inoperable. When the chemo side effects became severe, he made the difficult decision to stop treatment and choose quality of time over quantity.

And he planned another trip to Disney World. I sat beside him as we rode Snow White's mine train, and he sang "Hi ho, hi ho" along with the dwarves as we soared through the tunnels with our hands in the air. We returned to ride Space Mountain at

midnight just like we had when I was a child. Most nights, he and I were the last adults still standing with the kids as the parks closed with spectacular fireworks.

It has now been an unbelievable five years since my dad's diagnosis. Miraculously, he has been off treatment for the last two-and-a-half of them. His journey is known by many in the cancer community as a rare story of hope in a sea of heartbreaking ones. But it's his incredibly positive attitude from the very beginning that continues to inspire everyone he meets.

This year, Tyler Frederick (named for my dad), now in second grade, started his first year of travel baseball, and Kyle, a sixth grader, began his last. My dad cheered wildly as Ty pitched his first game and Kyle made his "major league" plays. Kyle's season will culminate this summer with the ultimate baseball experience at Cooperstown Dreams Park in New York. My dad most certainly plans to be there, and I no longer doubt that he will be. He and my mom have both retired and are busier than ever. The cancer remains. He still has scans every three months, and we never know what they will show. No doctor can medically explain how he is still living.

His latest big idea is for us all to go on a Disney cruise to Alaska, a dream destination of my mom's. I'm sitting by the pool reading the list of excursions and watching the four kids—now eight, ten, twelve and thirteen—splashing in the bright sun with my dad. The pool games still involve squirters and cannonballs. I think about the devastating diagnosis that he didn't let devastate us. In his very darkest time, he has chosen to live in the light.

—Jennifer Loomis Kennedy—

