

## Spectrum

It was a chilly September morning. I was just about ready to start my first day of the fourth grade. I was nervous due to an illness; I had missed the first day of class. As I walked into class, my legs started to quiver. I sat quietly in my seat. I did not talk to anyone for the first half of the day, and then we were placed in groups, terrifying me more. My palms were sweaty, and my voice cracked whenever I tried to talk to my group. I was convinced that this would be the worst day ever. Suddenly, a girl approached me with a friendly smile. Her name was Maleiha. She was able to help me feel more comfortable around all these new faces and the new environment. She told me that if I ever needed anything, I could feel free to ask her, and she would try her best to help. That small gesture started a friendship that I hold close to my heart and never forget.

Fast forward five years. Maleiha and I sat side by side in our first freshmen classroom, and the room reminded us of an old-style prison. The sunlight struggled to find a way in, I could see the fear in her eyes, and she was not used to this type of environment. We were both anxious for what was to come. I held her hand and told her, "Maleiha, it is going to be alright; I'm here for you, and whenever you need anything, you can feel free to come to me." She then smiled at me and said in a soft voice. "Thank you, Omeed, I appreciate it, and I'll come to you whenever I feel lost." When she smiled at me, I could tell she felt better and wasn't as afraid as she once felt. I was happy for her. Our friendship developed, we both relied on each other through the first year.

I found myself in a stressful situation; I didn't know how to balance my time between friends, sports, family, and school. I felt as if I was going to explode. I went to Maleiha for support. She welcomed me with open arms, she sat me down, and we discussed possible options

that would fit my schedule. After an hour of mapping out my daily routine, we finally concluded. I felt all the weight of the world lifted off my shoulders. I was so grateful to have a friend like her. Our friendship was one to envy. One day everything changed, and my life was never the same.

It was a cold November afternoon; the cool breeze of the wind ran through my body, leaving me in shivers. While walking through the neighborhood park, I heard the sound of my phone ring. I dug through my pockets to pull out my phone, and I noticed a text message from Maleiha. I was surprised because I hadn't heard from her in days. She was recovering from the common cold at home, and I didn't want to disturb her. I opened the message, and it read, "Omeed, I need to tell you something important." I was curious, but I was also nervous. I didn't know why I felt uneasy. It was just one of those gut feelings.

I responded with, "What's up? I'm listening, sis." The text message that changed my world soon followed "I have leukemia." I stared blankly into my phone, I was lost for words, and I honestly did not know how to respond to that. *How does a 15-year-old boy answer a text message from their best friend saying she has cancer?* I was devastated. I have always heard of teenagers diagnosed with cancer, but it's different when it hits so close to home. I had to hold it together, I needed to show strength, and I replied with, "Maleiha, it going to be alright; I'm here for you, and whenever you need anything, you can feel free to come to me."

Over the next three years, Maleiha went through numerous treatments to help defeat cancer. Her body endured more pain than I would ever imagine. I spent nights chatting with Maleiha, keeping updated on her treatments and significant appointments. I tried to steer our conversations away from cancer because I didn't want her to be reminded of it constantly. We would endlessly exchange common music interests. I loved electric dance music, and so did she.

I tried my best never to let the fact of Maleiha's illness change the way I treated her. She hated how people treated her differently. Students always offered to hold her books for her because they thought she was too "weak" to do it herself. She would mean mug those students most of the time and said, "Thank you, but I'm capable of holding my books." She was still the same Maleiha we came to know and love. I ensured that she wouldn't have to experience this sudden illness alone. Whenever Maleiha and I would talk, I would always tell her to look at the positive side of things; when she felt hopeless and weak, I told her, "You can beat this cancer, you're a strong girl, and I know deep down in both of our hearts that you can win and you will win, there is no doubt about that." I also told her to look to Allah (God) for help, and he would do more for her than I could ever. She was always in my prayers, and one day all our prayers were answered.

Maleiha was given the option to go under surgery and to have a bone marrow transplant. That would mean one thing, and she needed a donor. All she needed was a donor. That shouldn't be so hard to find. Those were the questions that ran through my head every day and night for the past week. I sat down with my good friend Andrea, and she turned to me and said, "I want to donate my bone marrow to Maleiha." The look in her eyes spoke volume. She was ready to do whatever it took to help Maleiha regardless of what it would do to her own body. I can't describe how I felt at that moment. I learned the true meaning of selflessness that day from Andrea. It was honestly a small price to pay for the cost of saving someone's life. Maleiha was not just anyone; she was a sister to me. She was family to us. We received good news weeks later, Maleiha found a donor, and she would be going through surgery soon. That was the best news I've heard in a long time. I was thrilled excited to see her after her operation. She returned to school looking healthier than ever. The smile on her face said it all; she was finally better. Better news soon

followed, and she was finally cancer-free! I was speechless. I was so happy that our prayers were answered, and she was a survivor. I couldn't be any more proud of Maleiha.

You know that old saying, "nothing good lasts forever? Well, things were about to change dramatically yet again. Life was good, Maleiha and I finally started our senior year together, and it started terrifically. I was excited to end my high school career with the same person I started it with. Now that I felt like a better person, my world could finally go back to normal. We spent a great deal of time together; we spent time together at the high school's homecoming game. I stood beside her as we cheered at the top of our lungs to show support for our school. It was a wonderful time. It was just like how it used to be.

Weeks later, sitting down in Avid class, I noticed that Maleiha usually sat in was empty. I decided to text her, "Yo, where you at?" Suddenly my teacher Mr. Rutkowski announced to the class in such a serious voice that he had terrible news. "There is something all you need to know, and it is about Maleiha. Leukemia has returned, and this time, the doctors said it was terminal." Mr. Rutkowski's voice cracked like shattering glass. Everyone in the room sat in awe. We were all lost for words. We could not believe what we were hearing. Seconds after the announcement was made, there was sobbing throughout the classroom.

We were all devastated and overwhelmed. I looked over to my friend Andrea and saw nothing but tears running down her face; it was heartbreaking. The disbelief look I saw on my friend Zade's face made me wonder, *How could this happen? Why was this happening?* I was so confused. Still, I knew deep down in my heart that this was not the end, and I knew that Maleiha could recover from this. She could beat cancer again, no matter what the doctors said. I believed in her like I always did. Maleiha went through countless treatments to fight off cancer yet again, and for a while, it seemed like it worked. She came back to school, and she looked and said she

felt fine. I told her I knew she could beat cancer again, she was a survivor yet again, and I couldn't be happier.

It was the big day, graduation. We finally made it! I was more than happy to see my best friend walk the stage to receive her diploma. The whole senior class got up from their seats and gave Maleiha a standing ovation. The smile on her face was priceless. It was a smile that could shine right through a hall of darkness. She deserved it; she was a fighter and a survivor. I was overwhelmed with joy; I was so proud of her, Maleiha finally did it. Through all the hardships and suffering, she finally made it. After the graduation, Maleiha told me she would be attending the University of Illinois at Chicago in the fall, and I was just as excited as she was to attend UIC. She mentioned multiple times that she worries that I would forget about her when I left for Northern Illinois University for the fall semester. She also stressed that we wouldn't talk as much or see each other. I made sure to get rid of all her pessimistic thoughts out of her head. I told her, "You don't need to worry about me forgetting you; you played such an important role in my life. How can I ever forget about you? You are more than a best friend to me. I see you as my sister. How can I possibly forget about family? She responded, "You're right; I don't know why I thought otherwise; we're family, so you'll always keep in touch." I smiled and said, "Of course, Sis."

Three weeks later, I texted Maleiha saying, "How's life treating you?" and she responded with, "To be honest, I'm sick again. They told me before prom day, and so I just wanted to be happy from now on. I'm going through treatment again for the 4th time. I'm pretty sad like I was starting life." I looked at my phone and sat quietly in my living room, and sobbed. I responded to her the same way as I did before, "Don't worry, you know if you ever need me, I'm here for you." She responded, "Thank you, Omeed."

A month later, I was walking around in the airport just admiring all the lovely decorations placed out for the holidays when I suddenly received a message from Facebook. It was from Maleiha's brother, Jasr; he messaged me saying, "Hey Omeed, thank you for being such a good friend to Maleiha. It's almost time for her to go." I looked at my phone in disbelief. It couldn't be happening; I didn't want to believe it. My world once again changed, and this time it was for good. I could barely breathe; I didn't know what to say. I asked Jasr what he meant by "it's almost time," and he said I should come by the hospital and say my goodbyes. After reading that, I sat down in a nearby chair and started sobbing. "This cannot be happening" I repeated that line in my head all day and all night.

The following day, my friends and I went down to the hospital. We were all lost for words; we didn't know what to say to each other. We just kept quiet until we got to the hospital. As we sat in the visitor's room waiting for the arrival of one of Maleiha's parents, we saw her mom open the glass door. We saw the sadness in her eyes, and when she spoke to us, we all could hear the pain in her voice. She wasn't able to complete her sentence without tearing up, it was something I had never seen before, and I never wanted to see it again. As we walked into the room while Maleiha was resting, we first made sure we were covered up to not spread any germ to her. As I looked at her in the hospital bed, my heart dropped, and I wasn't able to speak a single word. It felt like cotton balls in my mouth, I wanted to talk, but words were not coming out. She was lying there, her body covered with tubes helping her stay alive. Her body became so small, and it was as if her body was fading away. It was a heartbreaking moment; I started to tear up. I couldn't believe it. It still hasn't hit me yet. We left the hospital in silence.

Two days later, a day I will never forget. It was the day my best friend, sister, and role model passed away. I was in downtown Chicago enjoying the sweet freedom of finally finishing

my two-year job at O'Hare International Airport. I received a group message from my friends, which I wished I had never opened. "Maleiha is gone." one of my friends wrote. I was shocked; it was a feeling that was so indescribable. I honestly did not know what to say or react to it. I went home, and all night I couldn't sleep. I started balling my eyes out in my bed. I didn't want to accept reality. Jasr told me that the funeral would occur the next day, and I am strongly advised to come and say my final goodbyes. They were words I never wanted to hear. This kind of emotion was too much for me, and it was the first I had ever had someone so close to home pass away, and I didn't know how to react to it. It still hadn't hit me.

The next day was the day of the funeral. As I was getting dressed, I was still in disbelief; it still hadn't hit me that I was getting dressed for my best friend's funeral. As my friends and I arrived at the cemetery, we all stayed close to each other. We used each other as comfort. I looked around and spotted my friend, Jenny, crying her eyes out. Pain and heartbreak run down her cheeks. Maleiha was one of her best friends. When I looked down at the grave, I would hear my friend, Syed, utter the words, "She was so excited to start school. She was so happy to have her life back finally. It isn't fair. She didn't deserve this. She fought so hard." At that moment, it hit me. I lost a massive part of me, Maleiha was always there for me, and I didn't know what to do now. "Why? Why? Why? Why?" I repeated over and over again in my head until I finally snapped and burst out crying. It finally hit me, she was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. I had my good friends around me comforting me and trying to put me back together. I felt so emotional, and I couldn't breathe. Then I realized I wasn't the only one who lost someone so close to me, everyone else here did as well, so I needed to put myself back together and do it for Maleiha and her family to remain calm.

As the funeral came to a close, a group of our friends started to reminisce on all the great memories we had with Maleiha. We shared all the funny moments we had with her. My friend, Ahmed, mentioned how he fell for her friendly smile in middle school. A lot of her friends felt guilty that they couldn't spend enough time with her because they became so caught up in their own lives. I regret not mentioning to everyone something important she told me, "I can't get mad if my friend isn't able to see me as much as I want them to, they have their own lives and problems to deal with. I understand that's just how it is. I still love them no matter what." I was too emotional to speak, but it was something they deserved to know. After the funeral, I did not feel like going home, so I decided to walk on Devon ave. As I was walking, I ran into Jenny; she was parked in her car. She was still in shock. She invited me in, and we decided to go to Montrose beach. There was no cloud in the sky, we looked out into the clear blue lake, and it looked beautiful.

We both talk about how Maleiha impacted our lives. I told Jenny how Maleiha's illness changed my perspective on how valuable life was. "Life is so short, and anything can happen in a split second. I want to make a difference. I want to dedicate my life to helping others." I felt a sense of relief knowing that Maleiha was no longer in so much pain, that she was well rested now and was finally able to sleep in peace. I always told Maleiha that she would beat cancer, and even though the battle took her life, she still won; she's the one resting. She will forever be my angel, and she changed my life in so many ways. It was almost an experience that needed to happen so I could transition from being a boy into a young man. Now I wake up every day feeling blessed that I could live another day. I wake up every day in pursuit of making an impact on someone's life. I wake up every day with a smile on my face because I won't have to face any battles alone; I have Maleiha by my side now.

"Beginnings are usually scary, and ending are usually sad, but It's everything in between, making it all worth it"- Maleiha; Senior Quote.