



Papa

By Kiana Schmitt

The two-and-a-half hour car ride to San Diego that warm July afternoon was seemingly endless—like how time always seems to freeze when you're slouched in the seat of your least favorite class, hyperactively anticipating that glorious moment when the time reads "dismissal o'clock." The year was 2003. Gas prices had not yet surpassed two dollars a gallon And I still didn't truly comprehend the meaning of the C-word. I pressed my pudgy eight-year-old nose against the backseat window of our old Ford Explorer and tried to count the yellow traffic lines that dotted the 405-South. A fruitless effort; sixty-five miles per hour plus heavy eyelids equaled a blur of mustard trailing on the black asphalt of the highway. Soon, my innate, adolescent inability to focus on anything for more than five minutes prompted a graduation from line counting to cloud watching. My carsick gaze trailed up to the light blue blanket speckled with cream puffs and I spotted two fish, a dog, a dragon, and a man with a top hat until we finally arrived at the Big Building.

The Big Building was boxy and gray—grayer than the pale concrete across which I lethargically dragged my tattered, blue Sketchers. I followed my parents and my sister, and as we neared the Building, the sun decided to play hide-and-seek with the clouds, casting a shadow of an even darker gray over the place. The shiny glass doors slid open silently, eerily, followed by a gust of chill air that greeted us as we entered. I kept my eyes focused on the heels of my mother and the linoleum was littered with squeaks as my Sketchers hurried to keep up. When the heels halted, my eyes finally raised and I squinted through the cool air and looked around the room.

White, white, white. White—the walls, white—the chair, and white—the bed in which you were sleeping. White—the sheets

that almost blended into your skin. The only source of color was from the sun, which had evidently gotten tired of hiding. Through the white, white blinds of that cold room, the light leaked in slender drops of molten sunshine, adorning your pallid face with streaks of gold. Your lips parted ever so slightly, your brow furrowed deeply, and to this day, I have not forgotten the way you peacefully sighed,

"I'm ready, now,
Lord. Please take
me, I am ready..."

before a woman in white gently woke you. You could hardly recognize me, but you mustered a weak hello as I tentatively approached the white bed. I placed my small hand in yours and the wrinkles told me all your stories—the stories I wish I could have heard. Somehow, I smiled through the warm liquid carving salty trenches down my cheeks. I smiled and you took it and claimed it as your own. But I wanted you to have it. I didn't need it anymore. I still need you.

Eight hours later, I saw my father cry for the first time in my life. Eight hours later, I finally learned that the C-word was close friends with Death. Eight hours later, you finally allowed Cancer and Death to reunite. I'm still not sure if I believe in God, but I hope that He listened to your sleep-heavy sigh that day and took you by your wrinkled hand, because you were ready, even if I wasn't. And I hope that wherever you are now, it's anything but white.