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NO CANCER

Christian Abdo

He didn't cry because his lymph nodes were swollen and painful. He didn't cry when he learned it was because he had cancer. But he cried when he learned he'd lose his hair.

My stomach rumbled after a long day at the beach. I was staying with my aunt, uncle, and cousins at the Jersey Shore. We spent hours every day in the ocean, getting tossed around by the waves, eating just a few sandy potato chips, and maybe a juice box during the day. I was too shy, or lazy, to speak up about my hunger. Every wave pushed me closer to dinner, but everyone still needed to wash off the greasy mix of salt water, sunscreen, and sand before we left. Our cramped motel room only had one bathroom. I waited two hours to shower in cold water. Ritz-Carlton. I just wanted to go to

dinner as soon as possible. Someone asked, "Where's Andy?" I knew right where my cousin was: standing in front of the mirror, like always, styling his hair. He wasn't going out on a date or trying to get girls' numbers, but he always needed perfect hair. He was always fixing his hair, adding gel, and combing. I'll give it to him; his hair did look good.

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I wasn't the only one who got hangry after a long day at the beach. One time, I was sitting on the sofa, shoulder to shoulder with my cousins, and tension was brewing. Andy and I were fourteen years old. Puberty was underway. His sister made a comment about these weird bumps that were developing in his breast area. A fight broke out in motel room 308. She never made a comment about the bumps again, but that lone

comment was one more than Andy's doctor ever made.

Two years later, the bumps had moved to his armpit and neck. I asked what they were, but he said his doctor had told him that they were nothing. I couldn't help but wonder why there would be random bumps. Random? The body doesn't do random. Why would it? My body didn't do that. *Cancer* crossed my mind. I didn't want to say anything. A teenage boy doesn't just throw something so heavy out there. *Cancer* was and is always *italicized* in my head. I was just paranoid. It's nothing, they'd say.

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Years went by of Andy and I playing sports together, watching games, and just hanging out. He practically lived at my house. At age eighteen, I started to see him

less because his doctor's appointments had started to multiply. Tests left and right, and not because it was midterm week at school. The suspense wasn't even that suspenseful; I knew something bad was coming.

My phone buzzed while I was sitting in the cafeteria. I went to the bathroom and sat on the toilet, speechless. Kids were blowing clouds of Juul vapor and making plans for the weekend. Girls in the cafeteria were gossiping about homecoming. I had more on my mind that day. What was going to happen? How was Andy? My best friend. Cancer. Something you hear so much about, but still feels like it will never affect you.

I had to do everything I could to help Andy.

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My lawn was the stadium for weekly Sunday Football. Sunday Football featured a

Layout by Lydia Engel.

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game of two-hand touch football, and a ton of junk food while we watched NFL games. Lots of people from my school would come to play. A core group was always there: my closest friends and Andy, despite him going to a different school. We called ourselves the “Sunday Football Guys.”

The games went on, even though Andy had cancer. His mobility slowly decreased, but he still looked like the rest of us out there. One thing stood out: his winter hat. A winter hat was glued to his head, although winter was still a few months away. Andy would be overheating, but he still wouldn’t take the hat

one length of haircut—bald. Bald or bust. A few months into Andy’s treatment, his hair was patchy. Gregory was going to open on a Sunday to shave all our heads, “all” as of then, being me and Andy. I needed to rally the Sunday Football Guys to support Andy by shaving their heads. The reasoning was simple: The more bald guys around, the less noticeable it’d make Andy. He wouldn’t stick out like a sore thumb. For the time being, bald would become normal. I texted the guys about the plan. No one responded. If I texted them, “Come over, the Jets are playing Cleveland,” they’d be there in fifteen



Andy and the “Sunday Football Guys” after their haircuts.

Standing (from left to right): Hugh, Andy, Christian, Jack, PJ, Ben, Luke, Mikey, Shane.

Kneeling (from left to right): Kane, Josh, Dan, Eddie

off. Beneath it, his hair was migrating south for the winter. His pride was heading south, too, down to the beach where he always made sure he had perfect hair. A Sunday Football teammate was in trouble.

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Haircuts at Gregory’s Barbershop cost \$22, but for us, they’d be free. There was one catch: Gregory was only going to give us

minutes. Where were they now?

As if they were five-star football players in high school and not just kids in my yard, I began recruiting my friends, one by one, to shave their heads. Like any type of peer pressure, some gave in more easily. Mikey shaves his head as his normal haircut, so obviously, he was in. It was essentially just a free haircut for him. PJ shaved his head for a rap album

once, and it looked surprisingly good, so he was in. Jack, who was still working on his first kiss, said he had nothing to lose. The others were going to be harder to convince. It didn’t help that it was our last year in high school. It was time for that final push to lose your virginity or get some sexual experience before college.

Using what I’d learned in my microeconomics class, I put on my salesman shoes and started to persuade my friend Ben. Ben is big into fashion and his aesthetic. Unlike most teenage boys, he doesn’t just throw on whatever clothes are at the top of his dresser. Parting ways with his middle part was going to be a blow to his style, but he said he’d do it. Last to be convinced, was my friend Luke, who was suddenly having success with girls. People said he had had a “glow up,” meaning that puberty turned him from an awkward looking kid to a pretty handsome guy. Based on numerous compliments, his luscious dark hair was a key factor in his glow up. Luke reluctantly said he would shave his head, despite slowly becoming a long-haired legend with the ladies. The guys all said yes, but I didn’t know if any of them would actually come.

Gregory’s Barbershop was empty when I walked in. Gregory wasn’t even there while I was setting up tables of food for all the subs going to waste. Why was I worried about the stupid subs? I guess that would’ve meant no one showed up for Andy. I nervously fired off a few texts to the Sunday Football Guys. Where the heck were they? It was still early, but where the heck were they? Jack lifted a weight off my shoulders when he was the first to stroll in. Luke was next, which

was big, because he had a lot of hair on the line. He was tapping his foot and sweating as he waited. Ben arrived next, saying he would’ve been there sooner if he didn’t drive around the neighborhood a couple of times contemplating. One by one, the Sunday Football Guys arrived.

The crowd erupted when Andy walked in. “Surprise!” He sat down in front of the barber and took his hat off right away. This was the first time anyone, including his parents, had had a good look at his hair since it started to fall out. Well, there wasn’t much to see.

We rooted on Andy for a while, but soon it was time. I was wrapped in an apron, placed in a chair next to Andy, and one of Gregory’s apprentices started buzzing away at my head. The Sunday Football Guys filled the chairs in the barbershop today, not positions on the field. The fictional football teams in my yard every week were just part of the bigger team we really were. We were the Sunday Football Guys. Shortly, everyone’s hair was gone. Even my dad participated—this guy had to go to work tomorrow! The Sunday Football Guys got everyone involved. We ate all the subs, too.

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When someone has cancer, cells divide uncontrollably. When faced with the sacrifice of getting rid of our hair, there was a chance my friend group would become divided. Would I look at my friends the same if they said no? Would asking them to shave their heads be cancerous to our friendship? Thankfully, this wasn’t a story of division. This was a story of unity. Cell fusion is when individual cells combine to form a single cell called a syncytium. There was no cancer here.

Photograph courtesy of author.