

four years ago

I'm in fourth grade. One day, I'm sitting in my seat in class, minding my own business. I'm kind of quiet, but everyone knows exactly who I am: Jeffrey Alper, That Boy Who Had Cancer. There isn't a kid in the grade who hasn't eaten spaghetti at the church hall's annual Alper Family "Fun-Raiser" Dinner, or gotten dragged to a high school jazz band concert in my honor, or — God help me — bought a Save Jeffrey T-shirt. If you were me, you'd try to keep a low profile, too.

The door opens, and the school counselor walks in, followed by a scrawny kid on crutches. As the counselor starts a whispering powwow with our teacher, the kid sidesteps around her, and I gasp. He's bald. He's muttering angrily to himself. And there's a huge, curving red scar across the entire side of his head.

There follows the kind of awkward silence that, by the time we're in eighth grade, would probably cause

some wise guy to say, “Whoa, dude! Awkward silence!” But we’re still in fourth grade, so we just sit there and squirm until the teacher turns to us and says, “Boys and girls, we have a new student joining us today. His name is Thaddeus Ibsen. Do you remember when we had that talk last week about how we were going to welcome a new classmate? Well, here he is! Thaddeus is going to need our help in becoming a member of our classroom family, and I know I can count on each and every one of you. Now, Thaddeus, why don’t you come on over here and take a seat next to . . . let’s see . . . Jeffrey Alper?”

Why is she putting the new kid next to me? Suddenly, I get it. I don’t remember the special talk she supposedly had with the class last week, but then again, I’m absent a lot. Also, I don’t always catch on so fast, but this time, I put two and two together. It takes a moment for the counselor to pull out the chair next to mine, for the new kid to maneuver himself into it, and for class to start up again. As soon as the teacher begins telling us about our next

social studies assignment, I lean over and whisper, “Hi, I’m Jeffrey. I had cancer, too.”

He looks at me like I’m a particularly loathsome slice of school-lunch meat loaf and says, “Wow, congratulations! What do you want, a medal?”

That’s how I meet my best friend.

the end . . .

Well, for what it's worth, I'm here. I never knew it was possible to feel so numb on such a big day. I'm sitting in my hot, sticky gown, trying to keep my big, stupid-looking square hat from tilting and sliding off my head completely. It doesn't help that the metal folding chair I'm on has been baking in the sun for hours. I stare at the sweat-drenched neck pimples of the kid in front of me, but really I'm not looking at anything.

In fact, because I'm me, I'm spacing out. My mom always says, "Give Jeffrey ten seconds, and he'll find *something* to wonder about." And today, I have more material than usual. For example, why is everybody staring so hard at me? I guess I should be used to it by now, but I'm not. People used to stare at me enough when I was just one half of the Cancer Twins, but things have hit a whole new level since the relapse. And my long ride. The whole state testing

fiasco. The lawsuit threat, and the Great Eighth-Grade Walkout.

Now I am not just Jeffrey Alper, struggling eighth grader. Since all this stuff has hit the fan, for the second time in my life, I am Jeffrey Alper, Official Town Cause.

Go, me.

If you want to know how this thing started, I'll tell you. It was right at the beginning of the year, in Miss Palma's English class. She gave each kid (except me and Tad) a marbled notebook, and told us that she would assign journal topics several days each week as class warm-up exercises. Then she told us our first topic: The Most Annoying Thing in the World. I opened my laptop and got right to work:

When I was four years old, I was diagnosed with cancer. The treatment lasted almost three years, and it was rough. I lost all my hair, which used to be blond and curly and really cool. When it grew back in, it was brown and straight and really dorky. I remember being tired all the time, and having bruises all over

my body. Oh, and I used to throw up pretty often. I still have the scar on one side of my chest from where the doctors implanted my chemotherapy port, too.

I don't remember most of the details, but I know that being treated for leukemia was torture. The funny thing is, the treatment is nothing compared to what happens after you're "cured." And that's the most annoying thing in the world: They tell you how lucky you are to be cured, like you've escaped a death sentence. But being a cancer survivor can be a life sentence all its own.

On the last day of my cancer treatment, the hospital people threw a little party with cake and ice cream. Everybody was hugging and laughing, but my mom looked sad the whole time. On the whole two-hour ride home from Philadelphia, I tried to sleep. It was hard because my brother, Steven, wouldn't stop blabbing on and on about his girlfriend, Annette, but finally, Steven and I must both have dozed off. When we were maybe half an hour from home, I woke up. My parents were talking in the front seat, and it sounded like my mother might have been crying. Dad was being his usual impatient self.

"What do we do now?" Mom asked.

"What do you mean, 'what do we do now?' We get off the turnpike and make a left."

“Ha-ha. I mean . . . what do we do now?”

“I don’t know, honey. Maybe we go home and live happily ever after.”

“But we don’t know if Jeffrey will stay healthy. You know he won’t even officially be out of the woods for two more years. But there we were, eating cake and pretending everything’s perfect. It just seems . . . wrong.”

“So what are you saying? Should we sit around wearing black until Jeffrey’s almost ten? Look, I don’t mean to snap at you. Really, I don’t. It’s just . . . we have to put this behind us. The way I see it, we don’t have a whole lot of other choices.”

Looking back, it seems pretty weird that Dad was the one saying we should all live happily ever after. I guess saying it and doing it are two different things, or he wouldn’t hate me so much now.

“Time!” Miss Palma called. “Jeffrey Alper, did you hear me? It’s time to stop writing now.”

Apparently, she had been talking to me for a while before I noticed. Tad elbowed me in the ribs, and muttered, “Attention, Captain Spedling! All hands on deck!”

See, I have this problem. I get kind of spacey sometimes, and I miss some of the things my teachers say. That happens to a lot of kids who have had leukemia, because the chemotherapy drugs and radiation can mess up your brain permanently. Some kids come through it totally fine, but I'm not one of those kids. I never even had radiation, but I did have "high-dose and intrathecal methotrexate," which is the fancy way of saying that the doctors used to shoot poison into my spinal cord and bathe my brain in it. And it left me a little scrambled up. By the way, Tad used to make fun of other kids' disabilities all the time. I didn't really like it, but trying to make Tad politically correct was just a recipe for disaster.

"Uh, sorry, Miss Palma," I said. "I was just really concentrating on my writing."

She smiled sweetly. "That's funny, Jeffrey. You know, I taught your older brother, Steven. He was exactly the same way."

"Spastic?" Tad whispered, not very quietly.

She gave him a look. "Thoughtful," she said.

Wow, this was new. Teachers never had any

patience for my learning problems. And they definitely never told me I was anything like my perfect older brother. The bell rang then, and Miss Palma smiled again. “Well, class,” she said over the sound of twenty-seven kids unzipping their backpacks, “I can’t wait to see how we learn and grow together this year.” It was the kind of dorky thing that teachers say all the time, but I had the feeling Miss Palma really meant what she said. That’s when I started to think that maybe eighth grade could be different from all of the other horrible school years I’d had.

As Tad would say, “Hoping is your first mistake.”