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### Bieber Fever

Who could fall in love with a boy that parades around in a white Ferrari, cruising through neighborhoods at unwarranted speeds? How does one find themselves spell-bound by a kid who needs to be restrained by his bodyguards, drinks underage and attacks photographers? Bieber Fever runs rampant in U.S. society. The symptoms of the disease include, but are not limited to: screaming and/or crying, uncontrollable purchases of Justin merchandise, and poor concentration due to obsession with the 19 year-old heart throb. Some studies suggest that with time, the disease will fade like a worn out fad, but in my case, the Bieber Fever will forever remain rampant in my heart.

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Goosebumps ran down my spine and I randomly shook even with my khaki pants and long-sleeve white t-shirt. Ignoring the fact that my body temperature had to be below freezing, and my hands felt raw from the excessive Purell rubbed vigorously with each new room, I pulled my shoulders back, brushed the hair out of my eyes, and plastered on the “I am here to help you” smile.

My red vest labeled me with unprofessional indignation. It told everyone on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston that I was only a volunteer whose jobs consisted of playing with children and picking up crayons when the kids got fussy. It did not tell the stories of the rooms I had sat in. The vest did not show the countless tears needing to be wiped, pictures drawn on roll-up tables in hospital beds, and smiles produced from a simple box of crayolas. It failed to tell the memories of children whose only joy from the day came when that red vest walked into the room. To many on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, the red vest meant another person interrupting the care of a patient, but to the kids it meant a chance to escape reality for fifteen minutes. That red vest meant, even for just a little while, they got to be kids, and not children dying of cancer.

The last three months before heading off to college my freshman year, I traded in my cleats and glove for a clipboard and a red vest. I let go of the summer nights under the massive lights of the softball field, hoping to find passion for more than just the game and the team. I’d filled my summers with sweltering days on the dirt, with the dreams of playing college ball, but my body and my mind no longer allowed me to take my place on the field. It was with a feeling of defeat that I entered the hospital that first day. For though my heart was with the game, my mind became too consumed and my body too frail to continue with the sport I loved. For the length of my high school career, I allowed thoughts to slowly pull me away from the more meaningful things in my life. Eventually, after losing the one thing I thought defined me, I had to go looking for something more.

I prepared myself to see the worst, prayed for the best, and wished for a summer that I could look back on with pride. When I closed my eyes I imagined fragile children, carted around in wheel chairs, covering their baldheads with

baseball caps and knit hats. I pictured kids with nothing left but skin and bones and parents trying to keep their families together.

The truth is, the picture that is plastered on billboards and painted for you on TV about children with cancer is far from the truth. My first day at Texas Children's was filled with pint size versions of Hannah Montana and boys who wanted nothing to do with art and everything to do with the new Wii game system installed in the waiting room. The occasional cry seemed to be cancelled out with the enormous amount of laughter and smiles that erupted from the various activities the children go to do while receiving their chemotherapy. My first encounter with a child was Riley, a six-year-old rock star who dressed herself in a neon pink wig and a large purple tutu.

"I'm Hannah Montana!" she exclaimed.

I was not about to deprive her on her quest to stardom, so I gleamed back, "You certainly are! Can I have your autograph?"

As my first few weeks passed, I continued to meet characters like Riley. I met Aeron who danced with me as we listened to jazz musicians. I obtained my first boyfriend of the summer who wrote me a love letter saying, "Kaitlin, I love you are so beautiful and I like how your face is and you are so pretty." Little Ms. Faye showed me her hat collection and paraded me through her hospital room decorated with purple and pink butterflies. These children forever remain in my heart, not only for their fun natures, but also their beautiful souls. However, only one managed to truly entrance me and infect me with the Bieber Fever: Lillian.

Lillian was admitted during my second week at TCH. Any other day I would have passed her room by, finding it too difficult to work with a seventeen year old. There was a saying for patients over the age of thirteen: Teenager danger zone. Teenagers usually told me to "get out," "leave them alone," and "fuck art." Understandably, their world is much different then that of a child on the cancer floor. The teenagers are no longer able to live in a fantasy where mom, dad, and doctors surround them with love and it magically makes everything better. To children cancer is just a word, but to the teenagers at TCH, cancer means missing out on dates, getting held back in school, and isolation from the real world. It means spending your days in a hospital bed instead of the baseball field. It means never going to camp, or prom, or sleepovers. Cancer, for many of these kids, deprives them from being able to actually live.

So, that day, when I read Lillian's name and age, I almost passed her by. My thoughts ran rampant through my mind, and memories of past teenagers who were less than thrilled to see me held me back from marching to her door.

I almost allowed my own insecurities to get in the way of the possible happiness of a patient, but my mission brought me back to reality. As I did before every room I entered, I pulled my shoulders back, brushed the hair out of my eyes, and plastered on the "I am here to help you" smile. Then, I walked into Lillian's room.

"Hi, my name is Katy. I'm a volunteer here at TCH and I was wondering if you wanted to do some art with me?" I delivered the rehearsed line quickly, ready for the blow, but was surprised when she looked up and smiled.

Lillian did not appear to be from Houston. In fact, she did not appear to be from the U.S. As I would find out later, her thick black hair and dark complexion was the product of being born in Nigeria.

That day, her large brown eyes stared at me with curiosity and loneliness. Before she opened her mouth to say anything, I got the feeling that she had been alone for a while. She pushed her arms down on the bed to pull her self up to a seated position and asked, "What do you have?"

Thus, our relationship began over a box of crayolas, white printing paper, and a Disney movie. We bonded over age and our ambitions. She too had dreams of one day working in a hospital, helping those struggling just as she was. Lillian loved music and dancing.

She longed for more time with her family, but since her move to Houston for treatment, she rarely got to see them. Her father was able to come visit a couple times a month, but the rest of her family remained in Nigeria. TCH had become her secondary family, and throughout that summer I became a member of it too.

The standard time to spend in one patient's room was twenty minutes, but I ended up spending over an hour with Lillian that day. Over time, I would break many of the standard rules to be with Lillian. I made excuses to do rounds every day, so that I could visit Lillian. I prepared crafts with her interests in mind. My love for the other children continued to grow, but Lillian had a special place in my heart.

One day, we were listening to music on my iPod when a Justin Bieber song came on. Just as my eyes rolled to the back of my head, Lillian squealed and began dancing emphatically to the tune. I didn't realize at the time, but I had just become witness to the biggest Belieber I would ever meet. Yes, Lillian was not only infected with cancer, but also had a serious case of the Bieber Fever. Lillian exhibited all of the signs. She squealed uncontrollably whenever she heard his music, talked about him as though he were not of this earth, and loved everything about him. At the time, I was not a fan, but the more time I spent with Lillian, the more I began to appreciate what Justin did for her. Justin brought Lillian hope. His lyrics inspired her to keep going, even when she felt weak and tired of fighting. With every sung syllable and dance move, Bieber instilled joy in Lillian, and I wanted to do that for her too.

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My hands twitched by my side with excitement as I waited in the elevator the next day. I had spent my time at home the night before reading up on Justin, collecting more songs on my iPod and preparing what I wanted to be an awesome day for Lillian filled with nothing but Bieber. I practically sprinted my way down the hall to her room, but a "Precautions" sign hung on the door.

The bright pink form was one I had seen before. "Only official personnel may enter. Robes and gloves required." The nurse outside her door looked at me annoyed. "Volunteers are not allowed in that room. Can't you see the sign?" I shook my head yes, thinking it best not to argue and backed myself away from the door. I would return to the closed door every day for the next three weeks, but the sign remained like a lock on the door keeping me out and the cancer in. Each time I

braced myself, clenching my fists and hoping for the door to be open, but Lillian's door continued to stay closed and my hopes began to fall.

August rolled around and I was heading off to the University of Kansas in just a few weeks. I played with Riley and danced with Aeron, but my thoughts remained with Lillian. I began making my rounds the last week expecting that I would not get my chance to see her again. One day the door was open. I leapt into her room singing "Lillian", but my heart fell to the floor when I saw the figure that was once my fellow Belieber. Lillian was frail. Her hair was gone and her skin had turned a pail shade of grey. She looked at me and smiled, but the light was gone from her eyes. I choked back a cry, pulled my shoulders back and put on my "I am here to help you" smile.

"How are you feeling? Do you want to listen to music or draw?"

"I'm ok, but I hurt. No art today."

I left that day after only a few minutes. Lillian was tired and in pain. I could no longer see the hope twinkling in her eyes. I only saw a soul in desperation for a way to escape the body that was attacking her.

The last week at the hospital, I brought Lillian Justin Bieber's documentary, *Never Say Never*. We lay in her bed that day and watched the movie two times through. When I left her room for the last time, I couldn't help but hear Justin's lyrics.

"I will never say never! (I will fight)  
I will fight till forever! (make it right)  
Whenever you knock me down  
I will not stay on the ground."

Justin's music embodied Lillian's life. Cancer had taken so many things from her, but she refused to back down and let it take over. Lillian died in November of 2011. When I think about her I still hear the squealing of her voice as Bieber's song came up on the iPod. I see her dancing and smiling to songs that I once detested, but now could never live with out. Each time Justin Bieber's songs come on the radio I see Lillian, and I smile. I'm proud to say I'm a Belieber, and Lillian made me one.

### Author's Note

Thinking about Lillian still brings tears to my eyes today, but it's an experience that I wouldn't trade for anything. Looking back on the days I spent with her I am reminded of everything that was happening around Lillian and me. It was not simply about my time with her, but the entire experience I had at the hospital and how it left me thinking about my life going forward. My work at the hospital has taught me to always look for something to keep you going. So much in life will be missed if you are only focused on worrisome thoughts in your mind. Lillian taught me to keep fighting and as cheesy as it sounds, to never say never. Even with my own struggles I look to gain strength from my time with Lillian. Three years later I hear a Bieber song come on and I am brought back to the day I met sweet Lillian. I am constantly reminded of how precious life is and the importance of living in the moment.

Moving on with the class and conducting interviews for other articles strangely reminded me of my time with Lillian. Each time I went through the process of gathering information from my interviewees, I found myself becoming attached to the individual. My professional relationships turned into friendships, and the stories I heard and wrote brought me back to the importance of living life in the moment. These narratives have given me different perspectives on how other people live, and a better understanding of how I conduct mine. The time crunch was difficult and the page requirement sometimes frightening, but this class has taught me to be efficient and purposeful with my writing. I loved being able to share my stories about the hospital and explore new stories with two wonderful individuals. From Lillian and TXCH to softball and the stereotype dilemma, I feel I have broadened my writing ability and explored new ways to get words down on a page.