My third Christmas on this Earth was among the happiest in my family's history—or so I am told. Of course I do not remember anything. If I close my eyes and concentrate, the earliest memory I can conjure up is waddling down the halls of the eighth floor of SickKids, accompanied by an IV pole and my anxious parents. Perhaps if I had been born in the spring I would be able to remember those happy December days. After all, the time it took for Christmas cheer to turn to sorrow and anxiety can be measured in weeks. Perhaps instead of white, sterile hallways and beds which you can move up and down with the push of a button, my early recollection would entail colourful stockings, singing relatives, and the feeling of wonder as you tear away wrapping paper to see what had been sitting under the tree for so long.

Yet, to put things in layman's terms, those were not the cards I was dealt. While other two-and-a-half year olds were making friends in daycare and playing in their bedrooms, I was receiving chemotherapy and losing the little hair I had. While other parents were scouting out the perfect preschool, mine were worrying if I would make it to kindergarten and deciding who would work to keep our family afloat. It is evidence, perhaps, of the cruelty of the world that my cancer diagnosis came so early in life. To have one's life threatened by something they cannot even understand irrevocably changes the trajectory of that life, and all those around it. The story of my cancer treatment is one of many emotions. The despair, when my leukemia diagnosis came back positive, the stress, as my parents watched their fragile first-born become even more fragile, and the hope and joy that came about when my second bone marrow transplant succeeded. But that is not really my story. While my family was put through an emotional roller coaster, I was told I had a sad case of the “ouchies”. Although I remember disliking the unsavoury medicine often force fed to me, I feel that for the most part I was about as content as a two-and-a-half-year-old can be. My childhood cancer journey really begins in the years after I was discharged as I began to understand just what had transpired.

At first, I saw no downside to what had happened. I got to go to summer camp, miss school to visit the doctor, and was given a free trip to London. Yet slowly, over time, resentment began to build: beginning with the physical impacts of cancer. I was shorter than everyone else, less athletic, and my teachers would sometimes go out of their way to make sure I was doing alright (any elementary student can tell you that is uncool). While one-year-old me might have had a future in competitive swimming like his Dad, nine-year-old me had a restricted lung capacity and after years of having to avoid germ-infested public pools, could barely swim. As I got older, my perspective on other aspects began to shift. Missing school is less fun when you realize the reason for missing school is that you are high-risk for the long list of side effects of chemotherapy. I also found that I was missing people to talk to about my experiences. I had kept my story a secret from even my closest friends at school, not wanting them to see me as any different. The biggest shift came, however, when I started looking at what childhood cancer had done to others. That is not to say my experiences became impersonal. Rather, the biggest impacts of childhood cancer on my life are perhaps different than one might expect. This is because (with the exception of the months before my third Christmas on earth) I have only ever been a cancer survivor.

I remember waking up one morning to find my Mom standing in the kitchen holding a letter. Earlier in the year, I had attended Camp Ooch's (as it was at the time) overnight camp in Muskoka. The letter was informing me that one of the people I had been in a cabin with had passed away. I attended Campfire Circle (as it is nowadays) this past summer, for what was most likely the last time as a camper. It was one of the best times I have ever had, yet, even there, I found out from other campers that someone I had known had passed away earlier in the year. How has childhood cancer impacted my life? It has made it harder for me to be active, it has weakened the enamel around my teeth, and it has stunted my growth. It has led to feelings of loneliness, caused untold stress in my parents' lives, and forces me to be extremely careful about my health when I should be enjoying the best years of my life. But above all, childhood cancer has killed my friends. Childhood cancer causes pain in my life, and the lives of my friends, and unlike a monster in a movie or TV show, there is not much we can do about it.

That is, in part, why I am so thankful for the existence of organizations like OPACC. I am eternally grateful for the team of doctors and nurses that saved my life and continue to make sure I am in good health, but I have also been so greatly helped by the numerous nonprofit organizations across this province. They have reduced the feeling of hopelessness childhood cancer survivors often struggle with. Despite what our parents and inspirational movie scenes with swelling music might try to teach us, most children just want to be what society has deemed as normal. OPACC has given me and so many others that opportunity to feel normal. At entertainment events, like Toronto Maple Leafs games or visits to Canada's Wonderland, I can forget about all the stress in my life (cancer related and not), and just have a good time with my friends and family. My parents as well, have benefited from the wonderful work done by those at OPACC. My Mom has attended webinar events on aftercare and PTSD. A session on EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) as a way to fight post-traumatic stress was helpful to the point where my Mom has shared it with numerous other Mothers inside, and outside of OPACC. What I am most grateful for, however, is the work OPACC has done for the childhood cancer community as a whole. Financial support and giant teddy bears (the one I got the year OPACC partnered with Million Dollar Smiles) can make all the difference for someone with cancer (I still sometimes sleep with my giant bear).

I often reflect on how I can make a difference myself. As I have grown older, I have kept my survivorship a less guarded secret, to the point where I now feel no shame in talking about it with friends. I realized how privileged I was to even have this option. After meeting fellow survivors, some of whom no longer bear that title, I recognized that being a cancer survivor meant more than just having a once-in-a-lifetime wish, it comes with a responsibility. Receiving this scholarship would undoubtedly lift a financial burden off my parent's shoulders, who will have to work well past retirement to pay for an education for me and my brother. But it will also give me the chance to fulfill my responsibility as a cancer survivor. A responsibility to carry the torch for those who are no longer here and to not waste the chance I was given. I hope to use the funds from this scholarship to help pay for my undergraduate education as a stepping stone for goals later in life. I am fortunate to be enrolled in a double degree program at the University of Ottawa, a Bachelor of Social Sciences and Juris Doctor. At the same time, this year, I am working as a Parliamentary Page and learning how budgets and legislation are passed. I hope to one day work for Global Affairs Canada and represent my country internationally as an ambassador or as part of the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations. There, on the world stage, I also hope to shine a torch, a beacon to cancer survivors around the world; and I will know I have fulfilled my responsibility.