

Again

By Paul Booth

Sara asked me again “Paul, what are you going to do?”

I stared down at the cookie in my hand, hoping the answer to her question could be found in the chocolate chip that I was rolling between my thumb and forefinger I watched the chocolate rub off onto my figure.

I suppose I knew the answer before she had even asked. I knew what I was going to do when bought the cookies on the way home from the doctor office earlier today. The cookies were never something that I would have let myself eat when I was trying not to be sick, the chocolate and the nuts would have made the few moments of joy I had while eating them not worth it.

Realizing that she was not going to get a response she tried a different approach. She needed to be more potent.

“Are you going to drop out again?”

It worked; the word “again” broke me from my trance. Looking up from the cookie and squinting into the fluorescent lights, I responded.

“I guess I will have to. Anyone else here?”

I was trying to think of something else besides her last question. The quiet hum of the lab machinery was something that I had learned to ignore a long time ago, and today the “hissing” of the pumps would not be enough to get the word “again” out of my head.

She was right; I was going to have to drop out. Again. I was in my 5th year of college and I had been trying to piece together a degree for the last two years now. The last three years of school were interrupted by sickness two semesters where I was too sick to take a full load and another semester where I had to drop out altogether.

I winced in pain thinking about what she said.

Noticing that she struck a chord, and feeling bad about her word choice, she thought she would change the subject.

“Jim’s here. What are you going to say to him?”

I did not want to answer that question either. So I dropped my eyes back down to the cookie and I started to break off another small piece hoping that the time or the broken piece would bring about an answer to that question.

We both knew what dropping out would mean for my working in the lab. If I was not a University student, Jim would not be able to keep me on his staff. I would have to wait till I was healthy enough to enroll again.

“Your doctor is correct, losing twenty pounds in over winter break is not normal”

I had been losing weight for the last six months, since I had stopped taking Prednisone. I was happy to get off Prednisone because of what it did to my appearance. In the time that I was on it, my weight ballooned up, my face became round like a moon engulfed by acne.

But, since I had stopped taking it, I had stopped feeling good. I had stopped eating, because it would make me feel bad, so weight fell off me, eighty-five pounds to be exact. It was just the last twenty that were the most noticeable. It was the last twenty that made my eyes sink in, the last twenty that took with my energy and my fight. I looked like I was wearing someone else's clothes. They were bought in a time when I had the weight to fill them out.

"Paul, you are not the same person I met when I got here"

She had given up waiting for answers; she too knew the answers were not in the cookie that was in my hand.

I had been losing a battle with Ulcerative Colitis. The fight took more victims than just my academics and my path to graduation. It had taken my friends, my social life, travel, and my sense of humor. Three years of calculating the distance from a bathroom can do that to you.

Sitting there summing up the casualties of my war, it became clear what I had to do. I was not winning, and too much had already been lost for it all to have happened in vain. I just could not fight anymore.

I was going to have to have surgeries and quit the fight.

I started to feel the cold granite of the lab bench, and the rotten smell of the growth Sara was working on now felt foreign to me.

I slid down off the counter, realizing that I had only taken the one cookie out of the whole box and not remembering if I actually ate any part of it or just broke it apart with my fingers.

I passed the box of cookies over to Sara and said.

"Take 'em. They will make me sick"

I walked out of the lab to talk to Jim "again".