

## My Best Friend Died of Cancer

By [Emmercelle Deleon](#)

Daniel Joseph Riley and his maroon Volvo waited for me every morning at 6:30 a.m. Although I would always ask for five more minutes when he'd call, twenty-five minutes later we'd be on our way to Eastlake High School. He never once complained. Opening his car door, music would hit me – Elliott Smith, Damien Rice, or, if I was lucky, KC and Jojo. "Alllllll myyy lllllllife," Daniel would wail, "I prayed for someone llllllll youuuuu," his thumbs drumming on the plastic steering wheel, his brown curly hair bobbing to keep time with the music.

If Daniel wasn't busy earning his fingers' calluses from too much steering-wheel drumming or guitar strumming or songwriting, he could be found at a local concert. We sat in the back of a Copeland/Coheed and Cambria concert one Friday, three teenagers, Daniel, our friend Elliott and me, alternating between clumsily swaying to the music and pretending to mosh like we were pros.

"Watch this!" Daniel yelled to us before throwing himself into a group of glistening bodies.

"Where the hell did he go?" Elliott exclaimed, standing on his tippy-toes to find him. Daniel emerged a beat later, still hopping, with a lopsided smile.

Between concerts, student government and shared classes, inside Daniel's car we had our personal psychiatric sessions. Mentally and emotionally every day, Daniel took me home. Clad in glasses and his favorite "Me Without You" jacket, Daniel was the-know-it-all and the "I do speak for everyone when I say ..." on a variety of topics, from boyfriends with outrageous laughs to why I didn't win the school election when my other two running mates did.

"You did the best you could do, and that should be enough for you," Daniel told me, and didn't say anything when I accidentally let a tear slip.

When we sat in his car in the Vons parking lot one rainy Saturday, I listened to his frustration with the girl who'd won his heart, but hardly ever looked his way.

"What do I do? How do I get her to notice?" Daniel asked, pounding the steering wheel.

"Don't try and change to be what you think she wants. Keep on trying and be yourself," I said, and when I pulled out a Styrofoam container of Lolita's carne asada fries and handed him a fork, his outlook brightened up a bit.

Daniel was the kind of guy you immediately took a liking to. When I met him in seventh grade, he weighed an estimable 100 pounds and was shorter than me (to be fair, I was a tall girl). He had a high voice and sang soprano, a position usually sung by female singers, in our middle school's Vocal Ensemble. He'd helped give me an excuse to talk to my eighth grade crush, a member of Vocal Ensemble — in other words, I would stand there, stammering, while Daniel's twinkling blue eyes mocked me.

In our small high school it took Daniel 20 minutes to walk across campus. He was charming, and his debonair persona wooed the hearts of many, including mine. In ninth grade, I confessed to him my undying (puppy) love, and he took the situation and turned it around, deliberately finding in me, instead, a friend.

He had a knack for seeing more to any given situation. During one of our morning car rides, I was putting on mascara when I realized

I'd run out. Before I could begin to worry about having mascara on just my right eye Daniel told me, "Turn it over. There's more on the other side." I turned over the brush and found more mascara to coat my left eyelash.

In sixth period of Associated Student Body my senior year, I ran out of red ink for making posters and as I stood up to refill it, Daniel told me the same thing: "Turn the brush over. There's more on the other side." Alas, there was.

Daniel always found a way to see both sides, and to make the best of it. When he didn't feel the same way about me, he befriended me. When he fell head over heels for a girl named Catherine, though he expressed frustration, he reviewed his options, stuck to his guns, and she made him her boyfriend. And when he was diagnosed with brain cancer he didn't succumb to the darkness of the disease; he was, after all, alive.

Daniel was diagnosed in Dec. 2004, during our junior year of high school. He underwent years of chemotherapy, in which his hair routinely fell out. He wore a beanie he made himself, and promised to make me one when he found the time. He never found the time.

One night in early October 2007, Elliott called me.

"It's Daniel," Elliott said, "They're giving him anything between two weeks and two days."

A couple hours later, Elliott picked me up from the front of the Anteater Recreation Center. Riding in a car that wasn't the maroon Volvo, we arrived at the house in Santa Barbara where Daniel was staying just in time to catch him before he fell asleep. After three years of therapy, he looked skinny and pale against the sheets, but he still retained that full trademarked crown of curly brown hair and those mischievous blue eyes, blue as the sky on a clear day.

Oct. 31, 2007 was indeed one of those clear, "it's not summer anymore but surprise! It is" kind of days. I had just gotten to campus to find my discussion was canceled. The day was looking up when I got a call. "Hello?"

"It's Daniel. He died this morning."

Dodging people left and right, I couldn't seem to get to the bus stop quick enough. Then the bus couldn't get to Vista Del Campo as fast as it could, and it seemed to be stopping to pick up everyone and everyone's grandmothers. When I finally got to my apartment, I closed the window and drew the blinds. Without thinking, I opened my laptop, clicked through my iTunes, and pressed "Shuffle." As I leaned on my desk, clutching my head, my breathing came out calm and controlled. I closed my eyes. Train's "When I Look to the Sky," came up, and my control went with it.

Daniel's memorial service was a beautiful mass and many people came to pay tribute to the guy who would just sit and talk with you about your day. Many people cried, but curiously enough, the people who were closest to him didn't cry.

I'm still perpetually late, but this time, it's only me in the car. And while we're no longer in the maroon Volvo, sometimes when Sixpence None the Richer's "Kiss Me" comes up on my iPod, I can still hear him sing along, drumming his fingers.