In the Middle of Everything, Life Can Begin Again
by: Hope Thomson

When Ashley died I asked God why He didn’t listen. I had asked Him, begged Him, to take me instead of her. It wasn’t that I wanted to die. No, I remember quite the opposite. I was lying in bed, the darkness covering my body like a cloak, seeping into the cracks in my body and mind. I asked Him through my tears to take me, quaking with fear that my plea might be met with a sudden diagnosis of cancer-and Ashley’s sudden and miraculous recovery. Really it’s quite funny how quickly I’ve found I am willing to give up my own life. Perhaps it is because I see how fragile it is, this little flame that each of us guards so fiercely. Perhaps it is because I, like many others, love too quickly and deeply and yet so silently.

I grew up with Ashley and in many ways she was my best friend. It might seem silly, a babysitter who was more than a few years older than you to be your best friend but, at the time, I had no one else. She played games and drew with me and gave me presents on my birthday and on Christmas. I felt that she loved me. I was only 12 when she died and she was only 23. She was too young to die and I was too young to wish to die in her place. Over the years I have wondered if maybe that wish for death in her stead was fueled by that fierce and intense love that children seem to posses and that slowly quavers and burns out as we age. But I find that, even now, as an appropriately jaded 16 year old, I would still give my life for anyone. In fact, I’m afraid it seems that I am irreverent when it comes to my own life. Perhaps Ashley’s death has affected me in this way because it was the first death of someone I really knew. It was my first loss and it was, in many ways, the death of my childhood. I felt older after that and I never was the same. I do not want to die but I see death for what it truly is - inevitable. I have always and will always assume that others do not deserve to die. Surely they are loved more than I? Surely they have touched more lives than I?

My parents did not approach me too cautiously when it came to informing me of Ashley’s death. I do not think it would have been better whether they had eased me into it or not. It was the truth and one I needed to accept. However, I was closest with Ashley and could not for the life of me (pardon the pun) understand why my father and brother did not seem phased at all. As if death was merely an extended backpacking trip across Europe. I cannot remember my mother’s reaction. I was stunned. I was angry. Ashley was her parents’ only child - my parents had two children. Ashley was older, knew more people, had, it seemed, more opportunities. I was nothing. I was nobody. If anyone deserved to die, wouldn’t it be me? Even now, I can recall now a specific memory I had of her - the last time I saw her. She came by around Thanksgiving and we had a mock Thanksgiving dinner with her. She was so weak and tired-and she didn’t look like Ashley. She had lost weight and her hair, normally huge and curly and long was replaced with a wig. When we were playing before she left - a board game, I think, I recall being angry that she wouldn’t get off the couch to help me clean up. I thought she was being simply lazy. To this day that thought is the thing of which I feel the guiltiest.
Ashley died a year and a few days after our dinner together. The world was
dark the day she died and I hate to imagine how cold her little yellow Beetle must
have been that November. I hate to think of the hollowness her family feels each
anniversary. They must think of her every day. I do too. But, I’ve also learned some
great and wonderful things from Ashley. Like that Daniel Radcliffe is a Cancer, and
that her middle name is a last name, and that if you don’t have buns for a hotdog you
can fold a piece of bread in half. I’ve learned that cancer kills its victims long before
their heart stops beating. But the most important thing I’ve learned from her
passing is this - that in the middle of everything, life can begin again.