

## ***After Ever After***

**by Jordan Sonnenblick**

Four Years Ago

I'm in fourth grade. One day, I'm sitting in my seat in class, minding my own business. I'm kind of quiet, but everyone knows exactly who I am: Jeffrey Alper, That Boy Who Had Cancer. There isn't a kid in the grade who hasn't eaten spaghetti at the church hall's annual Alper Family "Fun-Raiser" Dinner, or gotten dragged to a high school jazz band concert in my honor, or – God help me- bought a Save Jeffrey T-shirt. If you were me, you'd try to keep a low profile, too.

The door opens, and the school counselor walks in, followed by a scrawny kid on crutches. As the counselor starts a whispering powwow with our teacher, the kid

sidesteps around her, and I gasp. He's bald. He's muttering angrily to himself. And there's a huge, curving red scar across the entire side of his head.

There follows the kind of awkward silence that, by the time we're in eighth grade, would probably cause some wise guy to say, "Whoa, dude! Awkward silence!" But we're still in fourth grade, so we just sit there and squirm until the teacher turns to us and says, "Boys and girls, we have a new student joining us today. His name is Thaddeus Ibsen. Do you remember when we had that talk last week about how we were going to welcome a new classmate? Now, Thaddeus, why don't you come on over here and take a seat next to ... let's see...Jeffrey Alper?"

Why is she putting the new kid next to me? Suddenly, I get it. I don't remember the special talk she supposedly had with the class last week, but then again,

I'm absent a lot. Also, I don't always catch on so fast, but

this time, I put two and two together. It takes a moment for the counselor to pull out the chair next to mine, for the new kid to maneuver himself into it, and for class to start up again. As soon as the teacher begins telling us about our next assignment, I lean over and whisper, "Hi, I'm Jeffrey. I had cancer, too."

He looks at me like I'm a particularly loathsome slice of school-lunch meat loaf and says, "Wow, congratulations! What do you want, a medal?"

That's how I meet my new best friend.