



## The Boy with the Wig

*Writing prompts, discussion questions, and audio transcript*

### ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

**Kat Yeh** is the author of the award-winning middle grade novel *THE TRUTH ABOUT TWINKIE PIE* and the picture books *YOU'RE LOVABLE TO ME*, *THE MAGIC BRUSH*, and *THE FRIEND SHIP*. <http://www.katyeh.com>.

### Talk it Out

Read the following anonymous quote:

*What you can't say owns you. What you hide controls you.*

### Now discuss:

Do you agree with this statement? Can keeping a secret make things worse than just telling the truth? Explain your answers using examples from Kat Yeh's story where applicable.

In the seventies, people did not openly talk about cancer because it was so hard to discuss. What do you think we are *not* talking about now that, in the future, we'll wish we had? Brainstorm and create a list.

Finally, imagine that the student in Kat Yeh's story did not have cancer and there really was something wrong with the water in his house. Would it then be appropriate to make fun of him? Explain your answer.

### Write it Out

Choose one of the following prompts and write 1-2 pages, double-spaced:

- Pretend that you were in the classroom on the day when the boy came in wearing a wig. Imagine either how you would actually respond, or how you

would like to respond. Write the scene up as a journal entry. Be sure to describe the setting, the behavior of everyone involved, and your feelings.

- Imagine that it is the end of the day that Kat Yeh describes, and the mother of the boy with the wig (let's call him Jacob) sends an email to the teacher asking how his day went. Write out the teacher's reply, and the exchange between mother and teacher that follows.
- Pretend that you are a good friend of the boy who has cancer. You know both that he is not going to tell people why he has a wig on, and that if other students don't know the truth they might make fun of him. You also know that he wouldn't mind someone else sharing the news. Write a speech to tell your classmates, so that they know the truth before he gets to school.

### **TRANSCRIPT OF THE AUDIO MEMORY**

*Julie: I have now a fairly random and big question.*

*Kat Yeh: Yay.*

*Julie: Here goes. Do you remember any times growing up when you saw good versus evil playing out in front of you? It's a huge question.*

*Kat Yeh: When I think of myself as a child and I think about good and evil, the first thing that comes to my mind is, I always felt powerless as a child. I felt at the mercy of bad things or the beneficiary of good things.*

*Julie: Do you remember a time ever of seeing something bad happening or feeling like, oh, this is just bad? I wish I had power but I don't.*

*Kat Yeh: I remember in—I'm trying to think what year this was; I think it was either—it was ninth grade. I remember in ninth grade a boy in our class suddenly—actually it might have been eighth grade—a boy suddenly appeared. He had been absent for a while, and he suddenly appeared in class, and his hair looked different. I mean now it would be obvious he was wearing a wig. Nowadays we would all think, oh, he must've been sick. Something must be going on. I remember he appeared and he looked completely different. He had this wig on. If you think about it, this is—we're talking decades ago, the wigs weren't great. Everybody was looking at him in this puzzled way. He came in, and he said something like, "The water has been different in my house, so my hair looks different from shampooing."*

*We were all mystified by this. You know what? We were even younger. We were seventh grade. Now I'm remembering: my seventh grade English teacher looked at him when he walked in the classroom and she said, "Oh my goodness, is that*

*a wig?" He turned really dark red. He was like, "No. There's something strange with the water in my house." I remember the kids started teasing him mercilessly. I remember knowing that was wrong that he was getting teased. But, again, I'm sure I wrote about it, but I was never the person that would speak out. I would just feel all the feelings and feel them intensely. Then he would be absent a lot again. Then he was absent for a really long time. Then we found out that he had leukemia, and he had lost his hair. I remember being so angry and thinking, why didn't his parents call the school and tell them.*

*I guess, again, this is probably a generational thing. This probably falls under secrets, too. There are some things that feel so terrible to people that they think to say them aloud gives them some kind of power or allows them some kind of power. But sometimes you need to say things aloud to diffuse them or to make things better. I'm not judging the parents at all because what a terrible thing to go through and to not know how to handle it. That's terrible to feel that helpless and powerless.*

*But now, as a grownup, I think to myself, wow, I would hope that I would go to the school and say, "Listen, my child is going to come in. This is what's been going on. I think the class needs to be spoken to about it so that they're prepared." But instead, he went in blind. He wasn't prepared with what to say. He said something about the water changing in his house when it was obvious he was wearing a wig. I remember the boys teasing him mercilessly.*

*It was really, really sad. And, of course, everybody, when the story finally came out, felt terrible. Perhaps this was during a time, I mean, if I'm in seventh grade, it's the '70s. Maybe people didn't talk as openly about things.*

*Julie: Especially about cancer. I remember people used to whisper the word.*

*Kat Yeh: Just think how different his experience would have been and how much I would and all the children in that class would have learned from the ability to speak aloud and to discuss it and talk about the feelings and then be able to look at him and say, "I'm so sorry you're going through this. Can I do anything?"*

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