

BATTLE WITH CANCER

At the age of 41, my dad started to notice blood in his stool. He didn't want to go to the doctor's and left it unchecked for quite some time. When he eventually started to experience more pain he decided to make an effort and made an appointment. He was diagnosed with bowel cancer and by then it was already at stage 4. He was given six months to live.

He was a medium sized man, some people would probably say he was overweight. Therefore, it was quite noticeable when the illness spread throughout his body. I remember him getting thinner and thinner and his arms were suddenly looking so scrawny, like those of a malnourished child. Sometimes he would feel really cold and would sit in the shower for ages just to warm himself up.

He would ponder on what might happen in the afterlife and say to my mum, "I expect I will meet Bengt (his uncle) in heaven."

I know that one thing really saddened him, and it was the fact that he would never see me grow up. He wouldn't get to witness me marry or have children, or see what profession I would take to. He also expressed his concerns regarding what to say to us when he died. My mum simply suggested that he could say whatever came to mind when the moment arrived.

The week before he died he was at home for a few days and seemed to have so much energy. He really perked up, almost as if he was getting better and would recover. This apparently is a common occurrence as the body draws from its last resources. It didn't last long though and soon enough he had to go back to the hospital.

On the day that he died, my mum didn't make it in time to be with him during his last hour. My granadad had offered to give her a lift as

she didn't drive. But he was delayed for some reason and picked her up later than expected. When she arrived at the hospital room, my dad had already been dead for fifteen minutes. The nurse who met her in the corridor looked flustered and didn't quite know what to say. My mum still sat by the bed for a while to say goodbye. She was not sure how long she sat there for, or what she said, but there was obviously grief and sadness.

I had been to choir practice that day and when I got back home, my mum's friend, Inger, was there. She was normally very cheerful and chatted a lot, but this time I noticed she quickly said goodbye to my mum and left in a hurry. I went to the dining table where my mum sat and she told me that dad had passed away that day. She motioned for me to sit on her lap. It felt a bit awkward at first but I curled up on her lap and we cried and cried. Everything seemed surreal, like a dream, and it was hard to comprehend what had actually happened. Was it me in this story or was it someone else? How was it that the sun was still shining outside? It didn't seem right at all. Later the same evening Inger came back with pizza. I wasn't hungry but forced down a couple of slices anyway.

I had three or four days off school and felt extremely nervous about going back. Should I smile or should I look sad? I didn't know what to say to my friends and I'm sure they didn't quite know what to say to me.

I found it strange that the world carried on as normal around me. At home we were trying to adjust to the new dynamics of being just two people. Many times I would still lay the table for three instead of two. Sometimes I thought I heard my dad's voice or his footsteps around the flat. Other times I would look forward to telling him my news, only to be reminded that he wasn't there to hear it.

LAYERS OF HEALING

A week or so later, a priest came around to talk about the funeral. It was the same priest that I had come into contact with when I got confirmed. He was a strange type. My mum and I both thought he was socially awkward and he didn't make us feel comfortable at all. He stayed for ages going over the order of the funeral, asking the same questions again and again. We were both glad when he finally left.

Then we had to decide what to wear for the funeral. I don't think my mum wanted me to wear black so we picked a navy blue skirt suit that I really liked. I wore it a lot even afterwards.

I don't remember many details of the funeral itself, only that we sat on the front row. Part way through the service we had to walk up to the coffin and put our flowers on it. I think we had a plain red rose, one each. Afterwards we went to another venue where we had something to eat, and that was about it.

A week or so later, we gathered again at the graveyard. The ashes had been put in an urn and there was a small ceremony as the urn was lowered into the ground.

There was a gravestone of course where we went to put fresh flowers twice a year.

The grieving process has come in so many layers. Throughout my life there have been times when I have cried and really missed my dad even when I thought I wouldn't cry again. You never know what's going to be the trigger until it happens. One particular event brought a lot of healing when I was in my late forties. I will share this in a later chapter.

EMERGENCY CALL

Only a few months after my dad died, another incident took place that shook me up a fair bit. For as long as I can remember, my mum has taken a couple of tablets before bedtime for her epilepsy. Around this time the doctor had suggested that she would probably be able to come off the tablets gradually. So she had cut down to one a day, and then she stopped completely.

One morning I had just woken up and wasn't quite ready to get out of bed yet. Suddenly, I heard a massive bang and a crash. It felt like my heart stopped and I dared not move. What was that!? Then there was a noise. A gurgling kind of noise. I couldn't figure out what was happening, but I was too scared to have a look. On the other hand, I couldn't stay where I was. So, like a secret agent, I moved my head very slowly around the door post until I could see into the other room. I then realised that the gurgling noise was coming from my mum's throat. She had suffered a massive seizure and had fallen off the chair and landed on the floor. A coffee cup had flown off the table as she fell and there were ceramic pieces scattered all around her. But that wasn't the worst.

I saw that there was blood coming out from her head, spreading onto the floor.

She had suffered with mini seizures when I was younger, but I had never witnessed a big one like this.

As I slowly moved towards her, I noticed that my body started to shake. I was so frightened. In a small, weak voice I said, "Shall I call an ambulance, mum?" She didn't reply of course, so I went to the TV room next to my bedroom where the phone was. My hands were shaking as I tried to dial the number. The emergency number was 90000 at the time and I remember counting the zeros carefully to get it right the first time.

As soon as I hung up, I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't bear to go back and look at the blood on the floor and listen to the throaty noises. Instead, I went straight to the hallway and looked through the front door peephole. As we were on the ground floor I would be able to see the ambulance as soon as it arrived.

Suddenly, I noticed that everything went quiet. There were no more gurgling noises coming from the dining area. If my heart hadn't stopped before, it certainly felt like it did now. My immediate thought was, "Oh no, she died!" I still couldn't bring myself to go and check on her, and I stood there for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for the paramedics.