

My Story by Nicola Miller

Approximately 4 years ago, on 20th June 2012 my world came crashing down. I lost my person, the person who just got me, the person who answered my every call, be it once a day or 10 times a day, the person who listened, often disagreed but always pointed me in the right direction and the person I spent so much of my time with. I lost my mummy.

Her battle started on February 14th 2011. She had undergone some routine tests which had flagged up a possible problem and after a few more investigations unfortunately the results were not good. As she put it, when she told both my brother and I "there is something there", this translated to "I have bowel cancer". And there started our battle.....!

At first it was not bloody and the outcome was positive. She required an operation to remove the tumour but in subsequent meetings after she had more scans we were told it had spread to a couple of lymph nodes and chemotherapy was necessary to be on the "safe side".

I think I could tell you about every meeting and appointment we had during the whole 16 month period. I attended 95% of them and the feeling of dread I always had waiting is one I will never forget. My hands used to get sweaty, my stomach would flip and my heart would race and thump. The clock would tick so loudly and all we could do was wait and wait a bit longer holding our breath in anticipation for what was ahead of us. Were we walking into good news or bad?

At the beginning I did not know we would be attending so many of these meetings. The prognosis was good. She would have the operation a small course of chemotherapy and clear by Christmas. How wrong we were. Unfortunately the cancer had spread to the liver and a second op was needed. The new plan was 6 sessions of chemotherapy, followed by the operation and then another round of 6 necessary as an "insurance policy".

During the recuperation periods after both operations and during her chemotherapy she lived with us the majority of the time and my role changed from being her daughter to her primary carer. I took and sat with her during most of her chemo sessions and then cared for her at home in-between. I managed the strict drug regime, spoke to endless consultant secretaries and liaised with them about having the right information and test results at the right meeting. I spoke to insurance companies and I became an expert in tea and coffee making for all the endless visitors she was lucky enough to have. In addition I did all the things, as a daughter you never in your wildest dreams thought you would have to do for your mother. I supported her as she climbed the stairs, I helped her go to the toilet and towards the end I would wash and bathe her. While all of this was extremely difficult I believe I was privileged to be able to do this for her and I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

I am sure you have heard it before but cancer affects the whole family, not just the patient, but spouses, children, grandchildren friends and for my mum even her small dog Fudge. While the patient is suffering with the gruesome side effects of chemotherapy all family and friends can do is watch from the side lines as nervous spectators with little or no control,There is nothing they can do to help or make it better.

Mum suffered badly with the chemotherapy and there were always complications. She was allergic to the cocktail of drugs they were giving her and often the session was cut short because she was having extreme reactions. When she was able to tolerate the poison they were pumping into her body the side effects were brutal and left her in bed, and at times in hospital, for days. She

was such a fighter though and so very brave. She used to say the pain and the suffering was a small price to pay to get the all clear. Her motivation was both her granddaughter who she loved and adored and when they were born they became her world. She was determined she would watch them grow and share all of their special milestones with them.

Unfortunately her wish did not come true and the treatment never worked, the cancer returned to the liver and then to the lungs and the harder she fought the more tired she became. In the end, approximately a year after she was first diagnosed as a family we learnt the awful truth that there was nothing more they could do and we asked the question we never thought we would have to ask. How much longer?

We were told approximately 3 months and they were extremely accurate. After a couple of months of being treatment free she was transferred to the North London Hospice. The hospice is a safe, calm, caring and tranquil, environment for both the patient and his/her family. The nurses can only be described as Angels and they helped my mum leave this world free of pain and with dignity. For us, they helped us witness and handle the most unbelievable painful experience in whatever way we saw fit, holding our hands every step of the way.

After a week of being in the hospice my Mummy, Melinda, lost her fight and on Wednesday 20th June 2012 at 10pm we lost her..... I lost my person.

And here began my journey with grief as my companion.

I am writing this because I feel ready to share and I want to help others who are travelling on a similar journey. So many people have helped me along my way and it is time to give back. If it helps just one person, gives that one person an ounce of strength to carry on when the world looks bleak then I will know I have made a difference.

Personally it is a time for me to take charge of my journey. It is time for me to dictate the route I am travelling rather than letting grief navigate the way as it has managed to do for the last 4 years.

Grief is a pain, an emptiness so painful there are no words to describe it. It fills your heart and lungs and constricts your ability to breathe. I cried endless tears, they came without invitation and often when they arrived they would never leave. There were days when I would cry for hours, crying enough tears to fill a small reservoir and I would pray with all my might I was in a horrendous nightmare and eventually I would wake up.

For so long I lived my life under a cloud and even on the sunniest and brightest of days the cloud made my day dark. Very little made me smile, maybe a school show my beautiful girls were in or something they said or did and for the briefest, tiniest of moments I would smile. The problem was I wanted to share. I wanted my mum sitting there by my side watching the show with me or I wanted to be able to pick up the phone and relay the whole scene to her.....but..... I couldn't. And so the next wave of grief engulfed me and my briefest of moments was over.

In these dark days, I felt like I was standing on the edge of life looking in. I have learnt that life stands stills for no-one and while I wanted to press pause this was not an option. While I was able to get up in the morning and carry on with the necessities of life I was not living but just existing. I was trudging through each day simply going through the motions. The void was huge and the grief was taking over and taking me on a road with no direction.

As I travelled along this road I constantly wanted to find a sign post telling me how many miles it would take to get to the end.....how long would this pain continue for.....why was it not getting

easier. When I had my first baby girl I wanted a manual to tell me what to do and in a similar way with this life experience I craved information to try help me.

I trawled the internet, late at night when sleep was invited but refused to attend, looking for answers from others who had gone through this whole experience, maybe they could give me a time frame and point me in the right direction, because right now, at this point, I was lost.

I spoke to councillors and had hours of therapy but it never seemed to work. It did for a while but I found it would never last. Often I would travel up a hill and for a short while I would feel slightly better and life would get a little easier but then suddenly without warning there would be a bend in the road and I would tumble down the hill heading straight back to where I had just come from. I would fall and as I fell deeper and deeper, I would try to cling onto the sides but my hands would slip and before I knew it I was immersed in the depths of the grief once again.

What the councillors did say was it would get better with time.....that I needed to be patient. They said I had to go through the 5 stages of Grief.....

Denial.....Anger.....Bargaining.....Depression.....and Acceptance.

For me it never seemed to get any easier and if I did go through these stages I did not recognise them as destinations on my route map.

Eventually and without warning I realised there was only one advantage with hitting rock bottom, it's that there is only one direction you can go unless you want to stay there and set up camp. For me I knew this was not an option....I had a husband who needed me, 2 girls who I loved and adored and wanted me back and I was beginning to miss the feeling of happiness as well as being totally exhausted, working through grief is so very tiring.

Approximately a year ago, when the grief had sucked me in so far I was drowning, I suddenly knew I had to kick against the bottom, find the surface and the light that had been extinguished for so long, and try with all my might to breathe again. The day came without a sign post to follow but I just suddenly knew I had to find the strength and resilience to live again.

Since then I have taken strides to try and get my life back on track.... it has taken time and believe me I still have good days and bad but the bad days seem to be less and when they come

I don't seem to fall quite so far.....I think we can say it is a work in progress.....I understand now I can't reach a final destination because there is no destination, it is just a constant journey.

So why am I telling you this. I am no expert and I have no qualifications on grief or bereavement all I have is experience. I thought it would be helpful to hear it from someone who has worn the same shoes you are wearing and walked the same path.....I do know, no pair of shoes are quite the same and each journey is very different. What you are feeling, and the way you are handling your situation may be poles apart to the way I handled mine but if you can identify with any of these feelings or emotions then I believe one day without warning you will feel differently and slowly, very slowly your emotions will alter.

I refuse to tell you that time is a healer, I refuse to tell you when it will get better all I will tell you is I got through it and I was so consumed by grief it took over my world.

I still grieve and I still miss her more and more each day but I have learnt somehow to carry that with me on my journey, and slowly step by step I am building a new life not with her by my side but instead I carry her with me in my heart. I hope she is watching.

You will too because I am certain you will find the strength from somewhere deep within you. Don't rush, allow yourself as much time and space as you need. It might be a year it might be 5 but one day it will catch you by surprise and you will be ready to dig yourself out of the hole and find your light. X