

A Daughter's Journey

1) 'Lasagne' - Shock, Disbelief and Denial

It's funny how certain seemingly random things bring back certain memories, a smell, a song...for me, every time I plan to make lasagne it takes me back to that fateful day when my life as I knew it was turned upside down. Dad had always been the strong one in our family, both mentally and physically. His light hearted jokes, dry wit and eccentric idiosyncrasies always made us laugh. Every family, I believe has a backbone...for ours, it was dad. He was invincible to us, so fit, so strong as he used to boast as he would sprint along the coastal path, 'If you've got it' flaunt it!' Therefore, when he got 'the flu' in February for the first time, although surprised, we joked that perhaps he wasn't so invincible after all!

For some reason, this 'chest infection' wouldn't shake off and secretly he had noticed that carrying buckets of water up the stairs of his employer was becoming quite a struggle. As we walked along the coastal path on one of our many family picnics, he lagged behind, it was then he said, 'Jo, something's wrong.' as he tried to regain his breath. We insisted that he visited the doctor for the first time in decades, although we pointed out it was probably bronchitis or something, after all, he'd smoked for years and always had his pipe in his mouth and pointed out that maybe, just maybe, he was 'getting old' at 62. After all, to be fitter than his children, simply could not continue for ever more! The necessary chest Xray was done, which showed a huge pleural effusion which had collapsed his left lung. 'See dad, although not great, you could have something like pneumonia or TB which is manageable...You're strong... you've been working and walking with one lung!' as we saw he feared the worst, and so the inevitable tests and scans continued.

I'll never forget that weekend, it was May bank holiday and the sun was shining. I'd made arrangements for friends to come down on the Friday night to visit over the weekend. I had booked the Friday off work so I could go with mum, dad and my sister to the hospital for his results and so the night before, set to work, changing the bedding and replenishing my fridge with goodies for my guests, bacon for breakfast, eat out on Saturday... 'oh yes, I'll make a lasagne for dinner when they arrive.' Despite the disaster with my sauce at first, there they were, two delicious lasagnes, one for us, one for the family and as the cheese bubbled on top, I stood back and admired my creations. Now, I was prepared for the weekend, picnic hamper ready, wine chilled, just the formality of the hospital appointment to deal with first.

As we sat in the waiting room for what seemed like an eternity, we exchanged fearful glances as we noted families who had arrived after us, going into 'the room of doom' before us. Dad was pale with anxiety and I saw for the first time in my life in my 'teacher', the expression of a child as he nervously clasped his hands and tried to align his thumbnails. Nervousness and apprehension bubbled in the pits of our stomachs and eventually, we found ourselves alone in the big white waiting room and were called in. As the image of the scan that to me looked like a black and white picture of the ocean floor was presented to us, the words, 'I'm afraid you have Mesothelioma.' hit us like a sledge hammer although they had been delivered in a gentle voice. Dad's jaw dropped and his lip quivered, the saddest sight I've seen in a man's face that was always associated with wry smiles, laughter or concentration as he had always found solutions to problems. 'Told you,' he said as he looked directly at me as I recalled the image of dad flicking through his medical book trying to solve and research this particular problem. 'No!...this can't be! It's

ridiculous to even consider that for a brief spell in the spectrum of an entire life, a stupid job he'd taken as a youngster could have this effect so many years later!' I thought. At that point, as the consultant explained that the disease was incurable and discussed the options of possible surgery that MAY 'buy a little more time' and that compensation was available as an initial, immediate payment of (in our case) £25,000 as its only cause was exposure to asbestos, I sat there numbly and wondered if the five work colleagues of dad's back then were now, decades later sitting with their families, hearing the same news, that their daughters would too be losing their 'hero' because of a hard day's work.

'Would you like a biscuit?' the nurse asked nervously as if it was her only consolation as she brought our coffee into the 'private room'. Dad and I looked at each other and laughed... a private joke we shared recalling a comedy sketch where French and Saunders had asked the same question and offered the same to the Grim Reaper when he showed up at their house...the irony. I can't remember the journey home, we were numb and in disbelief. My sister checked the medical book when we got home and looked at me with dismay when she saw the average life expectancy to be up 12 months, depending on the individual. Dad requested that we went to a particular quiet beer garden/sun trap (even though he was tea total) to sit together in the sun. It was located in the sea side town where we lived. This surprised me as he was such a private man and the town was already bustling with holiday makers. As we sat there in silence and shock, I wondered whether I should give dad his Christmas present early which I'd bought last month as it dawned on me that he might not be with us and the reality of what we had just heard started to sink in although I refused to believe it.

'I'm so sorry, I'm going to have to cancel this weekend, we've had some devastating news,' I explained to my friend...this had never been a consideration for me. Dad said that he was so sorry, he didn't feel like cooking that night (mum and dad had 'reversed roles' years ago). I said that wasn't a problem, I'd made lasagne.