

A Heartbeat: Stephen Cardew

My dad moved into the hospice in November - the doctors having given up on his prostate cancer.

The hospice, a modern single-storey accommodation with sunlit, windowy rooms and wide corridors, was run by nuns. It was as refreshing as it was calming and, when I went to visit him there, I was sure it was a place to get better in. Either I didn't hear or I wasn't told the reason why he was moved there and so I visited, much as I had whilst he was in hospital, with bravado and cheeriness.

In early December, he broke his arm. He was levering himself up out of the bath, when his upper arm simply gave way, shot through as it was by metastasised cancer. There must have been a moment for him, after the pain and the shock had initially subsided (or been taken away by morphine and soft words), when he saw the significance of the fracture and death loom into view, no longer a stranger ever to be dodged.

We all live with hope and, despite my dad's enduring pessimism about what the world might bring him, I know that he retained some glimmer of positivity, even as the cures grew fewer and more desperate. So, when he got into that bath, I'm pretty sure he was anticipating only renewed cleanliness, but when he got out, he found himself wrapped in a towel and hopelessness. At least, I think that's how I'd feel.

My naivety died that day, not only about the progress of my dad's illness, but also about living a parented life with its background sense of protection, goodness and resources. Frequently, as a child, I had felt lonely, with that sapping void I had no capacity to fill. Despite my 33 years of experience, I still had not learnt to.

All of this is now 32 years ago, so plenty of time has elapsed to provide the opportunity for me to take my dad's death and make something good out of it, to seize that opportunity for self-healing but, do you know, I don't think I have. I think what I have done is slowly acclimatise to a world where there is only me behind me and, although that person is now a more substantial ally than once he was, I'd still rather have my dad back. In a heartbeat.