

# I'd give anything for a milkshake!

Driving to see her that cold, winter afternoon I felt anxious and afraid. I was frightened of facing what had been haunting me for the past four years.

Thoughts of gloom were racing through my mind as I was speeding along. But I managed to suppress each dark thought as I had done so many times before.

That day as I entered the room and saw her sitting in a chair by the window, I felt that for the first time throughout this seemingly endless ordeal that the curtain was soon to fall. Somehow I knew that it would take more than positive thinking to keep her alive.

Her face lit up as soon as she was aware I was in the room. I was glad she was smiling; it gave me the strength not to cry.

“How are you darling,” she said as she always did when greeting me.

I asked her how she was feeling and she said fine. I found it very strange that she could use the word fine to describe how she felt.

We philosophised for hours as we always did but something was different. I listened more carefully and held on to everything she said as if each sentence was the most precious and profound I had ever heard. We did not laugh as much as we usually did and there seemed to be a silent, solemnness between us. And neither dared to mention our fears.

As I walked through those familiar hospital corridors on my way home, I tried to remember what she looked like before she became ill. I wanted desperately for her to be well again and I thought if I could remember what she looked like everything would go back the way it was.

And I remembered the conversation we had shortly after her cancer diagnosis four years prior when I asked her why she wasn't angry about what was happening to her.

‘All the tears and anger in the world aren't going to make me live a minute longer than I'm meant to and what ever time I have left I want to be happy,’ she said.

Those words didn't give me the strength they usually did. They now seemed hollow and worthless. But still I had to go on for her.



From then on I spent most of each day and night with her. The other members of our family came from interstate to be with her. We talked and laughed and fought as any family does at a re-union. It was good being a family again – those lost moments in time, the ones you cherish as a child, were found and shared again in her hospital room.

Two days before her 55<sup>th</sup> birthday she started vomiting. It didn't seem important at the time as she'd been through much worse. But the vomiting didn't stop.

Two days after her birthday the hospital Chaplain, Sister Maureen, came bouncing into her room. She had the cure to stop the vomiting – in her hand she held a small glass bottle filled with Lourdes water. We all had a little chuckle but deep inside each of us desperately wanted the holy water to work.

Four days after her birthday I turned 29. I phoned her on the morning of my birthday but for the first time in my life she forgot to wish me a happy birthday. My sister, an ex-nurse, explained that because her kidneys were in failure they were not filtering out the toxins which were now slowly poisoning her brain.

That night we didn't celebrate my birthday with a cake, as we had given up eating in front of her. She had not been able to eat anything in around five days and now she was vomiting blood. Instead we joined in a love circle, as she called it, and she prayed for more time but if that wasn't possible she asked for the strength to cope with her fate.

I stayed that night after everyone left. I just sat by her bedside and watched her sleep. Some hours later she woke and asked me what I was still doing there.

We talked about my university studies and whether I was getting all my work done. She told me how proud she was of me. She also told me she was afraid to die, not because she was scared about what lay beyond but because she would miss her family and friends. I asked her if I could give her one wish what would it be.

'I'd give anything for a milkshake,' she said.

A milkshake? I wanted to lash out at something or someone for what I considered a terrible wrong. She was so young and had so much to live for. I could not accept nor understand why she was going through this.

She could see I was devastated by her simple yet impossible wish and as she always did, she comforted those around her.

That night she made me promise that I would follow my dreams, the ones we had talked about together. Those moments in time, where we shared so much with one another, are my most precious.

By the following morning she had deteriorated dramatically. She was now unable to follow a simple conversation. Her eyes were glassy and distant; and her skin had turned a yellowish brown.

She would sleep for long periods and then awake suddenly. Her breathing became erratic. Many moments would elapse between each breath – to us it seemed like an eternity between each intake of air – we waited not knowing which breath would be her last.



Hours passed in silence that day. Time was so precious to us now. Each second that ticked away drew us closer to that moment we had been dreading for the past four years.

We just sat around her bed talking to her. Sometimes her eyes would open but they would be blank – it was as if she couldn't see us.

During that day we played her favourite music and told her things we had never been able to say before. Our private feelings, the ones taken for granted, were now proudly spoken aloud. We brushed her hair, kept her forehead cool with a washer and turned her every few hours.

Nurses and doctors frequented her room that day out of respect. They knew her destiny lay in God's hands – there was nothing more they could do.

At 6.15pm that night her breathing became frantic – she began gasping for air. With each gasp she would try and say something. We listened intently. She kept repeating it and then suddenly we all understood. She was saying 'it's alright'. Those words filled the room for several moments and then she stopped.

There was crying all around me. I joined in but didn't fully understand why. Her breaths were getting softer and softer and then like an old motor running down, she stopped breathing.

I held her soft face in my hands. Her skin was hot and wet from my tears. I talked to her for a long time before being asked to leave by the nurses. I didn't want to go. While I held her in my arms I felt safe. I knew once they took her away I would never see her again.

I joined the rest of the family in the TV room. We reminisced – we talked about things we had tucked away in the attics of our minds. We laughed – we cried. But somehow each of us knew that she would be with us always.

I guess we were lucky in a way, we were allowed time to grow in love and to say goodbye.

This story is about a remarkable woman, Isobel Marie Hibberson, my mother.

