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The Time Machine

by Vera Gajic

Mum had been in hospital since I'd taken her to A&E eight days earlier on a freezing December evening. Since then I'd come to see her every day after work all weekend. I knew this routine couldn't last.

It had started when we noticed she couldn't pick up her coffee cup, missing it completely as she grabbed at the air next to it. The optician thought she'd had a stroke so after hours in A&E they did a CT scan and found a large bleed on her brain. Poor Mum, she'd always suffered headaches, did that explain her short term memory loss and general confusion?

I waited for the lift wondering how she would be today. She tried so hard to be cheery but I could see the loss and confusion in her eyes. Every time I got to the ward I had to search for her, never in the same room, constantly moved from bed to bed as they juggled the ever changing demands of patients arriving and leaving. I imagined her waking up everyday with no idea where she was or in which time zone of her life. We hadn't been given a prognosis of any sort. We didn't know if she would get better or most likely worse or what to expect. I don't think they knew either but there didn't appear to be any treatment so she needed to leave the hospital. In a lucid moment she'd made it clear she didn't want to go into a care home and I couldn't blame her, she'd seen Dad slowly dying on her daily visits feeding him with a baby spoon as he withered away for seven years.

Today I found her sitting in a bed in the middle of a large single room on her own. She'd not had a room like this before. "hello Mum what are you doing here?"

"hello darling, I have no idea, how are you?" always concerned about us, dear mother. I gave her some fruit I'd brought, found a chair and settled down to hold her

hand and find comforting inane things to talk about. I'd not been there long when a young woman walked in and said she'd like to talk to me. She found another chair and sat on the other side of the bed. "I'm Dr Berkley. Can I have a word with you? I have some news, I'm afraid it's not good" my mind raced, she was very serious but managed to look sympathetic at the same time. This was no ordinary update, my heart started racing and my hands started trembling, I hoped imperceptibly as I held Mum's. I wanted to tell her to stop, I didn't want bad news I'd had enough bad news. I wanted to close my ears and say no, but I didn't. I sat and stared at her as she told a long story of how the doctors had relooked at Mum's scan and thought there was more going on than a bleed and maybe they should do an MRI scan.

Poor Mum she'd had an MRI scan that day, all alone, she must have been so scared. She continued, without even looking at Mum. She told me that they had found a large brain tumour and five secondaries and really there was nothing they could do and we should take Mum home to die. She might have a couple of months. By the time she had finished the tears were pouring down my face and I couldn't speak, she didn't wait for an response. I looked up at Mum wondering how much she'd understood, she could see my tears. "Don't cry" she said "it's alright, I've had my life" and squeezed my hand and smiled.

We brought Mum home a few days later for Christmas. She sat quietly at the table while we tried to take happy photos and films of to make sure we captured her memory, there wasn't much time left. The grandchildren, old enough to know she wouldn't be with us for much longer kept asking her questions and wanted stories about her childhood, trying to grab as much of her memory as they could before it was too late. But it was too late, Mum didn't have anything left to say and she didn't feel like laughing and having her photos taken. I look at the photos now nearly ten years later and see her pursed lips, stopping herself from complaining. How were we going to get through Christmas day and how would it affect all our future Christmases.?

Then I remembered a Christmas twenty five years ago in our family home when Mum and Dad were still the heart of the family and we children were grown up but still single with our cousin and aunt. We'd bought a special present for Dad a compact video camera, he'd always loved making films when we were kids. He wasn't as interested anymore but cousin Marko, a precocious teenager loved the camera and used up two three hour cassettes filming Christmas day and boxing day. I remember being irritated with him for filming all the time, initially self conscious we forgot he was filming after a while. God we needed those films now. I emptied all the cupboards and searched the loft going through the boxes we'd never unpacked when moved in six years earlier. I found the camera on Christmas eve with a bag of dusty film cassettes at the back of the loft.

Setting up was the next challenge but after a few false starts we had it running. There we all were, young and carefree, eating Mum's delicious traditional Christmas pork and cabbage, drinking, dancing, being very silly. Did I really wear that awful top and what was I thinking dancing as if no-one was watching.

There was Dad playing silly games with Mum in the kitchen, moving the bottle every time she turned around to pick it up. There was Aunty Annie with her infectious laugh as she watched Dad pretending to be drunk while my brother and I were actually drunk. I hadn't ever seen a film of my inebriated self, the children found it fascinating and a window into our lives as young people they'd never seen and a grandfather they'd never known. I couldn't imagine why we'd never watched it before, maybe it needed to be kept for this special occasion. Mum was overwhelmed seeing her dead husband and sister as clear and sharp as the day it was filmed, tears of joy as she remembered how much she loved them. We all laughed and cried.

Marko had given us the most immense gift twenty five years ago without knowing it. Instead of celebrating a sad Christmas 2012 we relived a happy Christmas 1987 stopping only for meals and to sleep in the real world before returning for the next episode of the Time Machine. We watched in a state of heightened emotion, every moment meaningful and each funny joke replayed as we looked back at that innocent Christmas before death and sickness had touched our little family, no idea then how it would speak to us across the years. For those few days we stoked our fires for the long and painful journey ahead.