

“FADED”

Mum called in late October 1999.

“There’s something wrong with your father.”

Dad greeted me at the door with a grin.

“Don’t worry about your mother. I’m sure it’s nothing serious.”

He turned to close the door and the late afternoon sun shone through him.

“See?” asked Mum.

“It will pass,” said Dad.

It wasn’t immediately obvious, but when you looked closely at my father, he wasn’t all there. Physically, he was fine. I rested my hand on his slightly translucent forearm and looked at him with concern.

We knew that something like this might happen. My father was in remission from a severe stomach cancer. At the time, he’d been given three months. Two years later, he was still under that death sentence. But the doctors had eliminated all obvious traces of the cancer with an innovative experimental treatment and Dad was ready to go back to work. They’d said, however, that there might be some side effects.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“You tell me,” he answered. “You’re the one touching me up.” I took my hand off his arm – he wasn’t big on physical affection – but he was smiling in that tired way that had become his normal expression.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’m just not all there. It makes me a bit tired, but I’m ok. Monopoly?”

He did seem fine. He had Mayfair and Park Lane after three turns round the board and whipped us both into submission within an hour. I relaxed, slightly. Afterwards, I quizzed Mum while she was making tea.

“He seems fine, Mum,” I said.

“You’ve been here for a couple of hours,” she said. “I live with him. He’s not the same. Can you imagine waking up in the morning to see the time on the alarm clock through his snoring head?”

“The doctors said there would be side-effects. Hopefully it will go away.”

“I hope so,” Mum said. “He’s on some new treatments that are meant to make him visible again, but they make him grumpy. And I can’t wash the makeup off the pillows.”

So, Dad had to deal with the cancer.

And the cure for the cancer.

And now the treatments that counteracted the side effects of the cure.

I gave Mum a hug and sipped at my tea.

I rang Mum regularly and she sounded positive, but I didn't make it over for a visit again until Christmas.

Don't judge me. I was in programming during the time of the Y2K bug. I was working fourteen-hour days trying to get our system ready, and everybody else came second.

OK, you can judge me.

For Christmas, the five of us – Mum, Dad, my brother, sister and myself – rented a beach house for a week. Mum told me I had to be there.

"You said he was fine!" I protested.

"I lied," Mum said. "The cancer's back and we've had to increase the treatments. I need you all here. He needs you here."

I had an argument with my boss that almost lost me my job, but in the end, after I broke down in his office, he let me take the week off to spend the week with my family. We were all certain that this would be his last Christmas.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, throwing an arm around my brother and tickling my sister. Elise pushed my hand away and looked over my shoulder. I looked back and gasped. Dad was standing by the door, but I had to really look to see him.

"Oh wow," I said. "Hi Dad. You're looking – Oh wow."

Three months hadn't been kind to my father. He was almost completely invisible. I could see the outline of his body and the vestiges of his expression. I was pretty sure he was wearing that sad, tired smile. He reached out and touched my arm.

"It's. OK," he whispered. "Know I don't. Look fantastic. Wish this'd happened. When I was single." His laugh was a couple of wheezing breaths. "Girls' change rooms," he said.

"It's the treatment," my sister said when I pulled her aside to express my shock over Dad's lack of appearance. "The cancer's being beaten down, but the side effect is getting severe. He hates it." Her eyes shone with tears. "We hate it."

We tried to include him in everything that week. He'd sit on a comfy chair – we could see the indentation – and we'd ask him questions. But, not being all there, it took him awhile to answer any questions. And the answers didn't always make sense.

It hurt to see him like that. My father, always so completely full of life, was now empty. I got out of the beach house in the mornings and walked for at least an hour before coming back to the house, to face the spectre that used to ride a motorcycle to work. The man who hardly flinched when he was kicked in the chest by a cow.

Christmas morning was the worst. It was the Santa hat, resting in space, just above the indentation in the comfy couch. We opened our presents. Waved them at him in thanks and looked for a response. But he was having a bad day and he wasn't reacting. I haven't enjoyed Christmas since.

Another kitchen, another conversation with Mum:

"I wish you could have been around more these past few months."

"I know. You know how busy it has been with the whole Y2K thing."

"Huh. Y2K. Nothing will happen."

"Nothing will happen, because people like me've been spending all of my days in at work making *sure* that nothing will happen!"

"And what will that matter when he's gone?"

She slapped her hand over her mouth, but she'd already let it out. My heart was an ice cube in my chest. The corners hurt. The anger hurt more.

But I don't like feeling things.

I went for a walk.

We all made our excuses over the next day-and-a-bit, leaving earlier than we'd planned. I didn't go back into work. The world didn't end as the calendar flipped over from '99 to 2000.

"You want to come over for a game of Monopoly?" asked the voice on the phone.

"Dad?"

"Who else in the family still voluntarily plays Monopoly?" he said. "Oh, and I know I don't want to know the answer to this, but could you get hold of some weed?"

Apparently, Mum had convinced him to seek out a practitioner of alternative medicine. I rocked up to the house with a bag of Twisties, a few joints and a bottle of wine. I started when Dad opened the door. I could see him. He was completely opaque. From his waist, I heard a BEEP. I looked down and uttered a surprised “Ha!”

“Yeah, go on then, have your fun,” he said. At his waist was a little box. From the little box, four spindly mechanical arms waved frantically about carrying tiny paintbrushes. As I watched, they stretched out and applied dabs of paint to his exposed skin. A translucent patch was covered up with a realistic patch of skin-coloured paint.

“It’s an absolute pain in the butt,” Dad said as we walked inside. “And it is a tad messy. Not to mention completely ridiculous – argh, get out of it!” He slapped at a brush that was trying to paint the insides of his nostril. “But I feel good again, and it has nothing to do with the stupid pills and treatments the regular doctors are pushing at me.”

Over Monopoly, he told me he was going back to work. He worked for the Government. I assumed that was why he could go back to work so easily with a little box of painting arms strapped to his waist. The box was completely unmissable, but he said that nobody had even mentioned it when he’d gone in to speak to his boss.

“I don’t care,” he said, forcing me to give him all the orange properties to avoid bankruptcy. “I just like being able to talk to people and do things again.”

And then, like that fucking cat in the song, the cancer was back.

“We knew it would be,” Dad said. “It was a nasty bastard in the first place. But I feel ok,” he added quickly, when he saw my shocked expression. “You don’t have to come over all the time, just because I’m sick. I know you have your own life. That’s important.” He held my gaze with an intense look in his painted, pale blue eyes. “Don’t worry about me. But look after your mother.”

He managed two more months of work before he got too sick to work. The machine at his waist couldn’t keep up. He stopped work when the first complaint came in that he had missed an appointment. He was right there in the office.

Dad stopped taking the experimental treatment, but the damage was done. His body was completely transparent.

Mum looked after him at home for as long as she could. But it's hard to see the man you love fade away before your eyes. Eventually, we had to take him back to the hospital.

My sister and I were there when he disappeared completely. The cancer killed him, but the side effect of the treatment was what took him from us. He'd been only barely there for weeks. We would talk to him, but we weren't sure he could hear us.

As my sister and I watched, he disappeared. He flashed solid for a moment and then he was gone again.

Twice more he returned. Each time, his disappearances were longer.

And then he was gone. My sister and I held each other beside his empty bed.

Life still goes on now Dad is gone. But every now and then I look at the empty place in the photographs of the important moments of my life. My wedding. And my brother's wedding. And my sister's wedding. Me graduating to become a teacher. The birth of my nieces and nephews. They were all wonderful, happy joyous times. They were all missing one vital participant.

But who knows? Maybe the cancer didn't get him. Maybe the gap in the picture is the place where he's standing. Watching us grow up and achieve everything he wanted us to achieve.

Maybe the gap in the picture is my disappeared Dad. There after all.