

Chapter 14

A Serious Crisis – Winter 1996

By now the choice of title for this book must be clear to any reader. It came to me one day in a flash of inspiration when I actually thought I had enough material to write this sequel to “Cancer is Only a Word”. “One Lump or Two” is a humorous title and very English but it has a more sinister meaning. I become confused now at trying to remember how many lumps have appeared in my body. My non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma (and there are variations) has turned out to be a particular nasty one and since whatever entered my body before 1988 to trigger it all off, I am destined to be attacked by it unless a drug can be found to bring it to an end once and for all. It is not known how or why it chose me but it did and I have to just keep on fighting it if I want to keep living. Thank god, it is not hereditary so my family are safe from it that way. It also cannot be passed on to another person. It’s just me in a lonely sort of way.

To date the recurrences have been low grade and responded well to all treatments I received but this next one which surfaced towards the end of January 1996 was more aggressive. Surfaced was the literal word because I began to notice a swelling near the middle of the sternum. At first I thought it a bump from a knock I might have had but it slowly became bigger and it was hard. I brought it to Graham Jackson’s attention at a clinic check up and he wasn’t sure about it either. Since Steve Proctor became a Professor, holding the Chair of Haematology at the University Medical School and heading the department at the RVI, Graham Jackson had become his number one Consultant. Peter Carey, who was involved in a lot of my earlier treatments, had moved to a consultant post in charge of the haematology department at a big hospital in Sunderland. I still see Peter, now a friend, because he sings in the choir at our Last Night and has always turned up to support our other functions. Graham was a worthy successor to Peter and I rate both of them as highly skilled and very caring doctors.

Graham drew Steve’s attention to this phenomenon, as I regarded it, not thinking it was malignant, but when Steve booked me for a scan, misgivings began to creep in. These were confirmed when the scan showed a lymph node behind the chest wall but it had pushed or grown its way through the rib cage and that was what I had found. To be absolutely sure, it was removed surgically, at least the outside part was, and a biopsy taken. The results were confirmed and it was not low grade – it was aggressive and life threatening.

Steve said that it needed drastic treatment and I would have to go on a course of three very strong doses of chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy around the area itself. The chemotherapy would have to be spread over several weeks to allow me to recover from each of the dosages – the rescue period as it is called. I had a bone scan of the chest area in case it had spread to the rib cage but that was clear, much to my relief. During this time I would have to contend with blood

counts dropping drastically, possible serious infections as my bone marrow and, therefore, immune system became hit, nausea, loss of appetite and weight and, worst of all for me anyway, I would lose my hair again. All this sounds very familiar.

I have already mentioned in my first book the very strong psychological effect hair loss means to most men. I think it is worse for men than women because they can wear a wig without embarrassment; it is part of their fashion anyway. They have, more often than not, thicker and stronger hair than men and so it is not noticeable when they wear a good quality wig. Most men's hair thins naturally as they grow older so suddenly appearing with a thick head of hair, even if it is the same colour, is very noticeable. Successful wigs consisting of thinning or fine hair styles are not possible because the membrane of the wig shows thus defeating the objective.

Fashion for men is kinder at the present time because there has been a trend to have extremely short hair styles almost to the point of being shaved in many cases. Losing it chemically though isn't quite the same because there is a noticeable difference in the pallor of the skin from the treatment and the effect of weight loss which often affects the face. Put a "skinhead" alongside a chemotherapy victim and you can usually tell the difference. Another thing I've noticed is that women can wear headscarves in all sorts of attractive and acceptable ways. Men cannot and usually revert to a baseball player's type of cap. I am no different to most men. I do not like being bald and the thought of going through all that again gave me a huge mental hurdle to overcome. If you are diagnosed with cancer, which requires strong chemotherapy, the chances are you will have to face hair loss. One consolation is that it re-grows but it takes a while. However, if the end result is that your life is saved then you have to suffer it and swallow your pride.

The only consolation prior to these events was that Rosalynde and I managed our annual ski holiday in January at Sierre Chevalier in France with the hospital crowd. The fresh air, exercise and the good company helped prepare me for what was to come.

The first treatment began on 22 February and the subsequent few days were rather unpleasant but they passed slowly but surely. What didn't help, was knowing that I would have to go through it all again at least twice. It finally reached the end in March but by then I had lost my hair and body weight. Jekyll and Hyde were back – during these periods I always felt as though I was two different people leading two very different lives.

In the middle of March I started radiotherapy at the Newcastle General Hospital. Dr Helen Lucraft once again looked after all the arrangements; another doctor I have great respect for and I include her in my list of medical "friends". Fifteen sessions over three weeks was the prescribed treatment and I battled my way through as best as I could. That treatment on top of the chemotherapy hit me very hard but as long as I could see or feel that there was light at the end of the tunnel, I could cope with it.

For exercise I did some cycling round the country lanes between Westerhope, where I lived, and Stamfordham, where there was a nice pub. One day Rosalynde

was giving reflexology to a friend of ours in Ponteland and I put the bike in the car and set off from Ponteland to cycle to Stamfordham. I met some other bikers in the pub there and enjoyed the chat so much I forgot about the time resulting in a mad dash to return. I swung into the driveway at Ponteland braked, skidded, shot off the path into the rose bushes and somersaulted over them onto the lawn. Unhurt but shaken I climbed to my feet and looked around hoping no-one else had seen my embarrassing predicament. Rosalynde and her friend were looking out of the window killing themselves with laughter with no sympathy whatsoever!

Soon after that amusing episode I had lost my hair and beard and was coping with that as best I could and at the same time we had to start on Suzanne's first concert scheduled for 20th April with the young baritone, Stephen McElroy, making his debut with her. The whole evening was a great success but I had to appear without hair and beard and of course welcome the audience with a few quips and pleasantries but the reception I received from them was so heart warming I relaxed and enjoyed the evening very much.

The only thing which marred this first concert was that Alan Young, one of my close friends, had suffered a serious heart attack. He was undergoing major heart surgery so both he and Margaret were not in their usual seats that night. He eventually made a good recovery and played tennis and golf again as if nothing had happened.

I also had my SCAN just before the concert and it was clear; wonderful news once again which I was able to announce at the concert – would this be the end of it all?

Strangely enough it wasn't but in a different way because I began to notice a strange spot on the right hand side of my nose, which I just treated with cream. That seemed to work but a few days later it returned and became crustier and unsightly. I went to see my GP and he told me it was solar keratosis. This is a very early form of skin cancer caused usually by too much exposure to sun and, of course, I have spent hours outdoors walking, gardening, cycling and skiing over the years and, although 90% of the time I used sun cream, especially when skiing, I obviously hadn't taken enough precautions. It wasn't a melanoma and the cells probably hadn't turned malignant but if left untreated it could turn nasty. It then works downwards into the skin and the body and it's then when it becomes dangerous. It is particularly dangerous near the eyes and nose.

A few weeks later I was back in the RVI, this time in the Dermatology Department. The spot, which had grown bigger by then, was removed surgically by local anaesthetic so I was able to watch the process. It was painless and soon healed up. After that I made sure I was always well covered with a high factor sun lotion, I've had no problems since, just a scar on my nose. The piece removed was biopsied and had not turned malignant. Sun-seekers be warned!!

Shortly after that the Dunblane tragedy in Scotland hit the headlines and television, putting all my problems into perspective. What a dreadful, unnecessary tragedy, all those young children and staff wiped out by a madman! What a world this is at times, when, on the one side there are wonderful people helping and saving lives and on the other there are evil people destroying them and not just

human beings but all that is so important to this earth of ours, the environment and the creatures which share it with us. The legacy for future generations is a very shaky one and when I think about this it always brings my thoughts around to religion.

I mentioned in my first book that when the bad news broke in 1988, I did what most people do in very frightening circumstances – I prayed to God a lot through the weeks ahead and attended the lovely little church near Kirknewton, where our cottage is situated. The combination of this and long exhilarating hours walking alone in the Cheviots were a great source of strength to me. Over the recent years though, and I'm really sorry to write this, my faith has taken quite a battering and I've thought long and hard about it.

Some people have found a very personal link with God and whether it just happened or something occurred to make it happen, I don't know. In my case I have lost that feeling, which seemed to exist during the early crisis period. Whether it is because when things look and feel better I selfishly forget about God or I have prayed for so many people over the years and seen them die that it has become too disappointing for me to bear. I have also had so many disappointments which have slowly eaten away at my faith. Whatever it is, it is a great loss because you need to have faith. When I talk to people like priests and regular church goers there never seems to be any doubts in their minds and I cannot fathom that out.

Rosalynde has this very special feeling and receives strength through it. In 1988 when she was told I only had 12 weeks to live, she refused to accept it because her inner feelings, which she believes comes from God, told her I would live – she was right and she has told me the same thing at every recurrence. Her belief in this boosts my confidence every time and jumping ahead in time to the major crisis, which was to come a few years later, she still told me the same thing. This was actually strengthened by something which took place just at the same time.

It happened in a strange way when she was returning home from visiting me at the hospital. I was in a really bad way and even her faith had been tested! She had prayed throughout it but her feelings had begun to waiver and seeds of doubt were appearing. I hadn't helped matters by telling her I wished I hadn't come out of the anaesthetic because I felt so low.

She was following a white van and this was about 9 o'clock at night and the roads were very quiet. The van just seemed to appear in front of her and when they reached a roundabout she could then see the back of the van clearly. Written in broad letters were the words "OPEN YOUR HEART". At that moment her strength and faith flooded back and she told me all about it the next day. Rosalynde, my beloved, what would I do without you?

The difference between us is that I haven't been able to open my heart. I try very hard especially when meditating and listening to Mozart, my favourite composer, but nothing happens; maybe something else has to happen before this takes place.

My own philosophy is that if there is a God and all the priests tell us there is,

then why is this world in such a mess. God gave us free will so whatever happens is supposedly our own fault. After thousands of years I would have thought that, by now, God would have realised we cannot cope with free will and we desperately need help before we finally destroy this beautiful planet and everything on it.

My stomach turns every time I watch the television news and the graphic documentaries about war, atrocities, genocide, droughts and floods with epidemics of diseases, which result from it and which involve so many innocent people, especially children. How can God let this happen? Isn't it time God said "Enough is enough" and stepped in and sorted us out? I have talked to priests I know about this and even they cannot give me a satisfactory answer. Jesus Christ must have been a wonderful man and I try to model my life on his teachings – love your neighbour is the best one (that isn't always easy) and how simple it would be if we all did just that.

Power, greed, corruption and lowering of standards and morals all play big parts in this present decline and if there is any hope for the new Millennium, which is rapidly approaching, these have to be addressed by people who have the will, the strength and the power to do something about it and turn the tide before it is too late.

Enough of my religious views, back to the more worldly happenings in my life. The rest of 1996 passed without anything sinister or untoward happening. My hair was back by June and life slowly returned to normal and we felt that it was now possible to have a real break – a summer holiday in Scotland.