

## Chapter 2

### Life or death?

**A**ppointment day finally arrived. I was apprehensive and relieved at the same time. People at work knew by then, and my friends and neighbours had found out too. I had begun to hold my side and was constantly feeling for the lump which continued to come and go. This had resulted in people asking questions and the truth came out.

My experience of hospital was limited to visiting sick friends and relations so imagine my feelings as I reported to the appointments clerk. The inevitable wait followed and I resigned myself to a long session. I had brought a First Aid book with me as I was preparing for a First Aid exam at work, so I tried to distract my thoughts with that. My turn came at last and I was shown into a small room and met a young, attractive, female doctor and an even younger looking medical student. A lengthy and thorough examination ended with me on my side facing the wall and totally embarrassed: the doctor had inserted a rubber-gloved hand into my rectum, watched closely by a sober faced student as she explored my nether region.

The doctor couldn't feel anything. The mysterious lump always seemed to shy away from curious eyes and searching hands. Once again I began to wonder if it really existed. It was rather like the motor car which ails constantly, but always perks up and runs smoothly when confronted by the mechanic.

The doctor said she would arrange for me to have an ultrasound scan as soon as possible, that would apparently detect anything she couldn't feel. I left the hospital as mystified as I had entered it.

A week later found me back in the hospital lying on a couch watching another doctor smear a jelly-like substance on to my exposed stomach. He had already explained what was about to happen. I watched with interest when a swirling, ghostly picture of my insides appeared on a television screen as he moved what looked like a microphone over my skin. The doctor was a friendly fellow, who talked me through the examination and explained what my untrained mind could not understand. One sentence struck an ominous note – “There is a mass present in the bowel area, but I cannot tell you you what it is”. He showed me this on the screen and I thought I could detect a more solid shape amidst the swirling shadows of stomach and bowel gases. I had never heard the word ‘mass’ used before as a medical word and it frightened me immediately. For some reason the word ‘mass’ became linked with ‘massive’ in my already keyed-up imagination. I visualised a huge, black menacing object filling my stomach and bowel area. I remember nodding wisely as though I had just heard some commonplace remark, but my mind was in a turmoil. To be honest, I did not want to know anything more. The doctor, however, was obviously experienced and knew how to handle worried patients. I searched his face and listened to the tone of his voice trying, I

suppose, to detect information without having to ask for it. He was matter-of-fact and my waning confidence grew a little. He explained there was something there but he couldn't tell what it was: the ultrasound scan had its limitations. However, he asked, "Are you in a hurry? Because if not you might be lucky and could be fitted into the CT Scan schedule. Sometimes there is a cancellation, which could save a long wait and another trip back to the hospital". I said I had nothing pressing to do.

The CT Scanner is known locally as the Charlie Bear Scanner. The money was raised by the inspiration of Mrs Daisy Clark MBE, and Charlie Bear is the symbolic, cuddly, soft toy animal which helped to rouse the sympathy and support of thousands of North Easterners who gave their money to help buy the machine.

I was in luck. A quick telephone call to the CT Scan Department secured me an immediate appointment, but they needed me post-haste. I hurriedly dressed, thanked the doctor, and, following his directions, ended up in the Charlie Bear suite where a nurse was waiting for me.

She said they had just had a cancellation and could fit me in but they were running to a tight schedule and explained why. I had to drink what looked like a litre jug of yellowy coloured liquid but at a rate of a glassful every fifteen minutes – no trips to the toilet once I started. I undressed and put on a cotton robe which fastened at the back, sat down with my First Aid book and began my drinking session. The nurse re-appeared and looked a little surprised at seeing the book I was reading. "What's wrong? Don't you trust us?" she asked jokingly. I explained and we smiled together. The tension was broken.

About an hour and a half later, with a bladder that felt decidedly full, I entered the Scanner room. I was a little awed by what I saw. The room had a science-fiction look about it, dominated by the scan machine in the centre. I could see a stretcher-like bed which was facing the mouth of the Scanner; I was the 'food' to be fed into it. The nurse helped me onto the bed, explained what I had to do and what was about to happen, then with a practised hand inserted a tube into my behind and poured in a coloured liquid which was to help the scan images. I was rapidly losing whatever false modesty I had acquired over the years. Afterwards I turned my head and saw a large, darkened, glass window in the wall beside the entrance. Behind that I could see two vague figures seated facing me, but looking at what must have been instrument panels and screens. The nurse left the room and a disembodied, female voice, calm and reassuring, explained that as I was fed through the Scanner, I would have to breathe in, hold my breath and exhale on its instruction.

The scan shots took between ten and fifteen minutes. The bed and I moved a fraction of an inch at a time into the metallic mouth and then back at the same speed. There was a click after each movement and I assumed the detective rays were passing through my body at those moments, slowly building an internal picture on the screens behind the window. The next stage was a repeat performance, the only difference being an injection of dye, fed into a vein on the back of my right hand, before moving through the Scanner again. Finally, it was over

and I was helped from the bed. My main thought at that moment was to find a toilet and relieve my long-suffering bladder and bowels which I did, and the bliss was almost worth the suffering.

I returned home without any more answers and waited a few more days for the results. At this point I began to notice a change in attention from my friends and colleagues. Everyone was concerned for me and they all expected a bulletin on my progress. I was very touched by their concern.

The letter from the hospital arrived at last with the simple instructions to attend a clinic at the hospital at the beginning of the following week.

This time there were no preliminaries. After the inevitable wait, I was shown into a small consulting room and this time met a Senior Registrar. I sensed from his expression that all was not well and his words sent the repressed fears rushing once more to the surface. The Scan had confirmed a 'mass' in an area that was too dangerous to allow them to insert a needle into to take out a specimen for microscopic investigation. They did not know what it was and unfortunately the only possible way to find out was to perform a laparotomy followed by a biopsy on what they had been able to remove. The words seemed to come from a distance and although I didn't really understand them I sensed concern and urgency in the doctor's voice. I remember taking a deep breath and trying to keep my voice under control before I asked him to explain in layman's terms.

In brief I had to have an abdominal operation to explore the mass and surrounding area. It was an "alien mass" and could be benign or malignant. If it was completely removable they would take it out, but if not samples were required to determine its origin, type and possible treatment. Finally they felt the matter was urgent and they wanted me admitted on the Monday of the following week.

The next few days were a scramble of activity. The end of the school year was imminent and I was supposed to be preparing for early retirement celebrations. I was also involved in the final preparations for my most enjoyable working week of the year – the annual Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme Gold Residential and Open Gold Expedition Week at the beautiful location of Ford Castle and my favourite hills, the Cheviots, in north Northumberland. With help from everyone close to me, I managed to solve most of my problems, delegate urgent responsibilities to very willing friends and colleagues and with a more settled mind prepare for the trip to hospital.

Rosalynde and I own a farm cottage on the north-eastern edge of the Cheviots. We had bought it about eleven years earlier after renting one on a nearby farm since 1967. It was in a rather dilapidated state when we bought it but we had great fun restoring it and turning it into a weekend and holiday home. We had a close relationship with the local people there: Eric and Isabel, the shepherd and his wife, our next door fellow cottage owner, Emily, and Farmer Joe were all part of our country 'family'. The cottage had a large plot of land and during the summer months grass cutting became a carefully planned operation. With hospital looming up, I had to cut the grass. We decided to spend the last weekend at the cottage and invited our close friends, Alan and Margaret and their son Graeme, to join us. They and Rosalynde had never climbed Cheviot, and I had always

promised to take them up. It seemed an appropriate time. Deep down, too, I felt I needed a challenge to prove something to myself. I also found a peace in the Cheviots that I never found anywhere else, and I think I needed to find some peace before the ordeal that lay ahead.

We had a marvellous time: even cutting the grass seemed a joy. I absorbed everything from arriving at the cottage on Friday evening until we left on Sunday. I knew I wouldn't be there for some time and wanted to store the memories to take with me. Saturday was a walker's dream. The weather was fantastic and as we started the long climb up Cheviot from the Bizzle Burn, it really felt good to be alive. Gradually, thoughts of hospital were blotted out by the sounds of larks singing, the peat-stained waters of the Bizzle Burn tumbling down the rock strewn gorge, and the sheer beauty of Cheviot with its heather and peat-lagged slopes stretching up to the sky. Emily, our cottage neighbour, had joined us and halfway up we sat down on a rocky outcrop to recover our breath. The view was magnificent. We could see the coastline in the far distance dominated by the great Castle of Bamburgh. The North Sea was our horizon, and we could even make out the white caps of waves helped to shore by the easterly wind. We had a snack washed down by Emily's special brew – her version of hot Glühwein stored in a flask, the recipe derived from our skiing holidays abroad. It was potent stuff and the rest of the climb became hilarious as Margaret, who rarely drank and was easily affected, had us in stitches as she stumbled across the peat hags, actually falling into one at one point. As we headed home later that day I remember thinking that I could not have spent a better weekend anywhere else or with closer friends, and somehow my hospital visit didn't seem so threatening.

On 11th July my first hospital day finally arrived. Rosalynde was given time off school by her sympathetic Headteacher. She did her best to boost my flagging confidence as she drove her little red Ford Fiesta through the back streets of Newcastle to the General Hospital. She said, "I have a good feeling about everything and things will turn out well – don't worry." The squeeze of her hand freed momentarily from the driving wheel, sent a message of love and warmth to me, which I badly needed.

After registering at the admissions department we went up to Ward 17 and met the staff. I changed into my pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers, and packed my things into the suitcase, which Rosalynde was to take home for me. She stayed for a little while then left to return to school. I missed her as soon as she left and felt a little lonely and sorry for myself. That didn't last for long, however, because for the rest of the day I was kept busy with medical examinations, questionnaires to be answered, and a visit to the X-ray Department for a chest X-ray.

It is not easy, when going into hospital, to feel at home or be relaxed. There is the apprehension of what is to come, the slightly bewildering series of check-ups and vital information to be sorted out by the staff and, of course, the problem of breaking into the camaraderie which has developed amongst all the other patients, who have come to know each other. Fortunately I have always found it relatively easy to talk to people and I was soon chatting to my immediate bedmates.

Rosalynde returned after school was over and we spent a quiet couple of

hours just being together trying not to think too much of the next day. After she had left I prepared for bed and what looked like being a long night, filled with thoughts pouring into my already over-stimulated imagination. I have a large number of doctor friends and although they had all been helpful and encouraging, one in particular had filled me unintentionally with apprehension. I kept thinking about his last words to me which were, "Well, best of luck, George, I'm sure everything is going to be all right but it is always best to prepare yourself in case things don't turn out as expected." These words didn't have much impact on me at the time they were said because they were among a whole lot of other supportive verbal messages I had received, but they did now.

In the partially-lit atmosphere of a surgical ward, with the nurses setting quietly about their business amidst a mixture of sounds from patients, awake and asleep, all at different stages of recovery or decline, I began analysing my friend's words very carefully. I wondered what they really meant. Was he trying to prepare me for possible unpleasant news? Did he know something I didn't know because of his knowledge and experience as a doctor? Or was it just a friendly statement that I was now blowing out of all proportion? Once again I was amazed and a little frightened at how one's mind so easily loses control. I realised I was achieving nothing from all this and became desperate to fall asleep. I began wishing I had asked for a sleeping tablet, but as the NIL BY MOUTH sign was now over my bed I hadn't asked for one.

Surprisingly enough, I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remember was daylight pouring in and nurses bustling around the ward preparing everything for the day shift coming in at 7.30 a.m.

Nurses and doctors are surprising people. They carry a fearful responsibility, work unstintingly, and are faced with life-and-death situations daily. They must see and experience many tragic situations yet they always manage a smile and a friendly word when it is most needed. I looked at the clock and thought "My God, it is only 5.30 a.m.!" This hive of activity only really settled down when the ward doctors began their round at about 9.30 a.m. A clinical hush descended and everyone waited expectantly for their turn as the white coated figures moved professionally from bed to bed. They finally gathered round my bed and I tried to look bright and cheerful, but inside I was battling with the apprehension everyone has when faced with a team of doctors and surgeons. They, however, put me at ease, asked me a few questions about myself and told me I would be going down for surgery some time in the early afternoon and that I would have one or two last minute preparations carried out before then. These turned out to be the inevitable removal of body hair around the operation zone, a bath, and putting on the white theatre gown which ties at the back. There was a full length mirror in the bathroom and as I looked at myself I felt a little like the condemned man before the execution. What a cheerful thought! Back in the ward everyone looked at me and I could tell that they were thinking "Another one for the chop"! They were all sympathetic, however, and passed on words of comfort to me as I moved to my bed. Soon afterwards the anaesthetist appeared, followed shortly afterwards by the physiotherapist: both were very helpful and friendly. So far I was very

impressed by the carefully timed build up to my operation. The pre-med was the last thing on the list and this was administered by a doctor, who injected it into my arm telling me it would relax me before the operation. I felt I was the centre of attention and everything around me was geared towards my well-being. It was certainly good for my ego to have so many people taking an interest in me.

I began to feel drowsy, and then time seemed to stand still. I was curious about going into the operating theatre and was determined to stay awake as long as I could. What happened next is rather vague and appeared to take place in slow motion. I remember being lifted onto a stretcher trolley and hearing words like “Good Luck” floating towards me. I seemed to be pushed through endless doors until I recognised the face of the anaesthetist looking down and smiling at me. He said something, I felt a prick in my arm, and then nothing ...

My next recollections are very hazy: pain, discomfort and confusion were foremost, but in the midst of it all there was a feeling of elation that it was all over and life would soon be back to normal. I instinctively moved my hand to where the lump had been removed because I was convinced it had gone and felt a tug on my hand which was rather painful. I opened my eyes and through a misty sort of haze saw Rosalynde sitting at my bedside with Roxanne, my daughter, in another chair nearby. I turned my head and saw my son, Marc, on the other side of the bed. The tug on my hand was explained by the sight of a tube leading from it to a drip-feed bag suspended from a drip stand.

I smiled, at least I thought I smiled. Rosalynde told me afterwards that it was more like a grimace. She said my first words were “Hi, has it gone?”. She nodded, squeezing Roxanne’s hand out of my sight, to help both of them keep up my spirits and to stop them both from breaking down with the emotion of the moment. I sighed with relief and lay back on my pillow. If I had been more aware of my surroundings I would have noticed that all three of them were under a considerable strain and near to tears.

Perhaps it would help if Rosalynde told her side of the story at this stage.

“On the evening before George’s operation I visited him in hospital and we were both in high spirits, feeling very positive and sure that everything would go well. He was always so very fit and had never really ailed anything apart from the occasional cold, which he always said I carried in from the children in the nursery; no doubt quite true. We talked about the forthcoming summer holidays and where we could go for a short break. I also thought up various job ideas for him to do after his recovery from the operation but he quickly reminded me that he had taken early retirement to get away from all that. At that point John Thompson, a close friend, came in to visit and the subject was dropped and within a few minutes of his arrival we were laughing at past escapades. When visiting hours were over I left feeling much better about everything and George seemed to be in a calm frame of mind or so I thought. At the end of the ward I looked back over my shoulder to wave – he looked so small and vulnerable in the large ward

and I just wanted to rush back, put my arms around him and take all the worry away.

At home I had plenty to do to occupy my mind before going to bed, school preparation and chasing Marc and Roxanne to sort out their work. Once in bed I did my usual talking to God, rather than praying. I talked on the lines of how I felt sure this was a beginning of a new stage in our lives; I didn't know what, but I ended up almost bargaining with God – let everything be alright with George and we'll do anything you want us to do. Sleep would not come no matter how hard I tried so I just let my mind wander back on all the good things we had shared over the many years we had been together. Suddenly I woke up and realised that it was morning. My mind immediately went back to George in hospital and I tried to imagine how he would be feeling. All during that day my mind kept wandering back to him and what would be happening, it was very hard to keep my mind on my work. My staff were marvellous and tried to keep me cheerful. I rang the ward at lunch-time but was told there was no news yet and to ring back after 5 p.m. When everyone had left I hung around looking for things to do to keep my mind occupied rather than go home and watch the clock.

When I eventually arrived home Marc greeted me with “Dr Kendal's been over to see you but says not to go to the surgery, he'll call back later.” I had just hung up my coat when there was a knock at the door. As I expected it was Ridley, Dr Kendal, looking very serious. He asked if he could have a word with me privately as both Marc and Roxanne were hanging around in the background. We went into the front room and he asked me to sit down as he had spoken to the surgeon earlier and had some rather bad news to tell me. Ridley explained that the lump was a large, malignant tumour. The surgeon had not been able to remove it as it had grown around the pancreas; it looked very much like cancer of the pancreas. George was now back on the ward sleeping and was unaware of the situation. Ridley now had the unpleasant job of explaining to me what this implied. Apparently there was nothing they could do and I had to sit and listen to him telling me that George would not live much more than twelve weeks. “Twelve weeks, twelve weeks! My God, twelve weeks, what can you do in twelve weeks?” Those words stuck in my mind but I didn't feel or have the reaction I would have expected. I just felt as though I wasn't really in the room and that I was an observer rather than the recipient of bad news. Ridley was naturally very upset at having to break this news to me as he and his wife, Enid, have been our neighbours for many years. Before leaving he asked if there was anything he could do and I was to ring him if I needed answers to the many questions that were sure to come to me. I now had to break the news to Marc and Roxanne. Although they had guessed it couldn't be good news, they were not prepared to learn that their father had only twelve weeks left of his life.

Marc went very silent, Roxanne burst into tears and fled upstairs locking

herself into the bathroom – no amount of persuading and talking would bring her to open the door until she had controlled herself. I just wanted to hold them both. Marc gave me a cuddle and asked what we were going to do now. I explained that we would go into the hospital to visit their father that night, but when he asked if the tumour had been removed I was going to say “Yes”. The surgeon was to tell him the truth the next day after a good night’s sleep. George, I know, is the sort of person who would want to know the truth straight away. Before we left for the hospital I rang my sister, Avril, at Carlisle, who said she would leave immediately and come and stay with us. I also rang my closest friends including Benjamin Luxon, the famous opera singer who had been at college with George, and they were more like brothers than friends. He was shocked and said he would fly up as soon as he could rearrange his rehearsals in London. By the time I went upstairs to change I was in a daze, I sat down on the bed expecting to crumble inside but instead was overwhelmed by a feeling that George was not going to die. This feeling stayed with me all the time and when I told people they all thought it was the shock, but I really did have a warm, calming feeling inside and in my head. I will never forget that moment and the feeling is still with me now.

George was very drowsy when we finally arrived at his bedside. He could hardly remember anything afterwards except asking me if the lump had been removed. I just nodded whilst squeezing Roxanne’s hand. It was the hardest time of all, trying not to break down for his sake and keep a brave appearance at the same time. Fortunately we didn’t have to keep this up too long because he was heavily sedated and dropped in and out of sleep until we left. My sister Avril, Margaret Young and Margaret Goodarzi, two very close friends, were waiting for us back home. Family and friends are worth their weight in gold at a time like this. At home I found I was the one who was comforting and reassuring people who called. The phone never stopped ringing with calls from friends and colleagues, word had spread very fast. George had made so many friends in his work over the years and the calls went on for weeks. After Marc and Roxanne had gone to bed, Avril and I sat and talked for a long while before turning in. My bed felt very empty without George and I tried to imagine what it would be like if he did die but then that calming feeling came back very strongly and I soon went to sleep. I only briefly called at school the next morning before arriving at the hospital about 9.30 a.m. just after the doctors’ ward round as I knew that they were going to tell him the news. He was sitting up in bed looking small and frail when I entered and the ward, I noticed, was very quiet. I smiled and he tried to smile back but it didn’t work. I held him close and after a while we started talking about how we would fight this together and that we were going to win. Little did I know how long it would take and what George would have to go through in the next few years. I stayed all that morning returning again in the evening. Each time I visited I changed into something different, always bright and

cheerful, it was my way of showing him I was still feeling very positive. This I continued to do every time George was in hospital, even when I visited three times a day as I did while he was in isolation after having his transplant. Afterwards he said it had really helped and had taken his mind off cancer for a while and we laughed about some of the outfits I had worn.

Ben phoned later that evening to say he was flying up to Newcastle to see George as he was very upset and wanted to see him. He asked me to pick him up from the airport at 8 a.m. the next morning so that he could spend the day with George. Goodness knows what time he had to leave Kent to catch that early flight. I was thrilled because Ben is such a positive person himself and it would be a wonderful surprise and tonic for George. In the hospital the three of us spent the day talking about alternative treatments then all too soon Ben had to leave. At home I involved Marc and Roxanne in deciding which alternative treatments we would try and this helped them to cope with their shock. One of my first phone calls in this search was to the Bristol Cancer Centre and then to Joan Ridley, who had started the Northumberland Cancer Support Group. Little did I know how this phone call was going to change my life – my leaving teaching and going back to studying complementary therapies. Some good things do come from cancer. I love my work and have met some truly wonderful people who are connected in some way to cancer, either battling with the disease or working to find a cure. As George says, cancer is only a word, and we must try hard to think of it in this way.”

I cannot even remember them leaving as the more consciousness returned, the more pain began to seep through making me restless and uneasy. I must have been given a strong knock-out pain killer because I remember nothing more until the next morning when the daily routine of the ward was once more in progress.

I felt much better and began to take stock of my surroundings. The drip was still in my hand and I was very much aware of my stomach. Any slight movement brought a twinge of pain in that area and I could feel I was well strapped up there. I gingerly explored the dressing, remembering Rosalynde’s nod when I asked her if the lump had been removed. I couldn’t feel anything other than the dressing but I wasn’t too worried.

One of the nurses came to give me my periodic 5mm of water, my only intake by mouth for the next few days, and she told me that the surgeon who had operated on me was coming to see me. He was at that moment standing talking to the Ward Sister. I recognised him because I had met him once at a friend’s party and knew that he was to be my surgeon

He eventually came across to my bed and sat on it. I thought it was good of him to come and see me personally: he was obviously a very busy man. I waited for the expected good news but he looked very grave and I felt my first misgivings. He quietly and firmly told me that I had an inoperable malignant tumour situated in a very dangerous position in the bowel and pancreas area of my body and he was very sorry to have to tell me he had only been able to remove a piece for

biopsy and was awaiting results. He said he had spoken to my family doctor and he had thought I was strong enough a person to be told such news. He also said that Rosalynde knew – she had known since before her visit to me the day before. I lay propped up by pillows absolutely stunned for a moment then a flood of thoughts poured into my head from all sides. I didn't want to hear any more, I wanted to be on my own to be given time to face the terrible news and pull myself together. I was afraid to speak in case I showed my fear and burst into tears. What a lot of nonsense is pushed into the male mind about biting your lip, pushing back the tears, showing a brave face and so on! What I wanted was to cry in someone's arms, be comforted and told that everything was going to be all right.

Male fortitude prevailed, and I thanked the surgeon for telling me in as brave a voice as I could produce. I didn't really take in much more of what he said after that but I do remember him saying I should take every day as it came and not think about the future. We all had to die sometime and love and prayer were a great help. As he left he said the nursing staff were there to help me, and if I wanted to talk, I just had to ask. He had no sooner left when a staff nurse came across to me and said they had just heard the news and one of the other staff had telephoned my wife at school and she was on her way to see me. She said if I needed someone to talk to just to let her know and visitors could see me at any time. I said I was okay and just wanted to be left on my own to think for a while.

I am sure it was at that moment that my awareness of life and everything around me took on a startling clarity. I was facing death, I knew that. I think I had always known it was cancer from the first tentative touching of it but the mind's safety mechanism had kept up the hope. I was still somewhat stunned by the time Rosalynde arrived and I didn't know what to say to her. We looked at each other for a while and then she gave a wan smile and hugged me as best she could. The nursing staff seemed to have disappeared and the rest of the ward seemed very quiet.

It was a very poignant moment. Rosalynde was very brave and she bolstered up my spirits considerably. She told me how our family doctor had called at the house personally to break the news. Apparently the diagnosis was terminal cancer of the pancreas and there was nothing they could do to treat it. It was only a matter of waiting for the results of the biopsy to confirm this in about seven days' time. At the most I had about twelve weeks to live. Looking back it all seems matter of fact information to be told, but how else can the news be given?

I lay in bed for the rest of the day feeling sorer and sorer for myself. I felt estranged from the rest of the ward. Those who knew either avoided looking at me, or gave me glances of sympathy or pity. I was still very sore from the operation and every move was painful but it didn't seem to matter any more. I dreaded having to face my family and friends as they came to visit me. How would we react to each other, knowing I was dying? In a strange way, I knew I would be embarrassed by it all and really didn't want to meet that sort of situation. I also began to think about how I would die and whether I could face up to it. Would it be painful as the weeks went on? Would it be humiliating as everything about me began to crumble?

Next morning after breakfast the nurses came to my bedside and asked me if I would like to try sitting in a chair. I felt lethargic and depressed but decided it was worth a try and after some painful manipulations they managed to put me into an easy chair where I tried manfully to find a comfortable position. Some of the patients smiled and waved at me and I tried to fake an interest in my surroundings, but my thoughts always came back to the same things – cancer, fear and despair.

My bed was near the ward entrance and as I slumped more and more despondently into my chair, the swing doors burst open and a larger than life, bearded figure burst into the orderly routine of the ward. The hands waved in circles like Al Jolson singing *Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye* and there was a beaming smile lighting up the face as he danced towards me. If it had been a scene from a Brian Rix farce it couldn't have been better timed. The Consultant Surgeon and his white coated team were halfway through the processional ritual of the ward round and were almost opposite my bed. They looked up, shocked at this desecration of their temple and I burst out laughing for the first time for weeks as I watched the figure advancing towards me followed by a more sedate Rosalynde. She was also smiling and looking very much back to her lovely self. I had, of course, recognised the figure immediately and if I hadn't, the voice that boomed out his greeting and made everyone continue to stare at him would have left no doubt even in the stygian darkness of a Northumbrian pit-shaft.

It was Benjamin Luxon, one of Britain's leading opera singers and an internationally recognised concert and recording star. I struggled to my feet just in time to be taken into a bear hug, which should have put me into intensive care. I felt his strength, love and compassion flow into me, followed by a surge of renewed hope. I clung to him, soaking up this wonderful feeling, which only comes from very close friendship. I gasped out, "Ben, I don't believe it, how did you get here?" I knew he was in the middle of rehearsals in London so it was a complete and utter surprise to see him. Rosalynde had joined us by this time and I disentangled myself from Ben and gave her the hug she deserved because I knew this was her doing.

In the ward I think there must have been a frozen moment of time as everything seemed to stop to observe this happy reunion, held under tragic circumstances. Then, as though a switch had been pressed, everyone turned back to the business of the day. It was a moment I will never forget as long as I live and I will be eternally grateful to these two people, who, alongside my two children, I love more than anyone else in the world. This was a significant turning point in my fight back to recovery.

Our friendship with Ben goes back to September 1957 when I left the RAF after a two year National Service stint to attend Westminster College in London for teacher training. Six of us gelled very rapidly into a friendship group, and Ben and I seemed to hit it off from the start. Although we came from extreme ends of the country – I was a Northumbrian and Ben a Cornishman – we had a lot of things in common including our upbringing, and we enjoyed doing the same things. He was always better at them than me, but I never felt any resentment: in

fact whenever we did things together Ben always brought out the best in me and managed to make me try harder and improve my standards. I wish he could have done this with my voice but I have never been able to sing a decent note. He did, however, turn my attention to classical music and opera and I learned to appreciate the finer side of music from him as the years went by. Thirty years later he was still having the same effect upon me.

The three of us sat around my bed talking together in very much the same way as we had since college days, except that there was an air of urgency about our discussion instead of the carefree chatter of earlier times. We talked till lunch time about my predicament and how we would beat it. There was never a moment when the feeling of hopelessness returned. Ben had already telephoned a friend in America, who had told him there were alternative medicines which produced amazing results and asked him to send out a clipping of my hair for analysis. This took me rather aback. "What on earth can they tell from a cutting of hair which is dead material anyway?" I asked. Ben said he had had his hair analysed by the same medical group in America and they had sent him a very detailed list of dos and don'ts about diet etc. to help an arthritic problem he had in his hands. Rosalynde produced a pair of scissors, and the first positive step of our own was taken towards a healing process which I like to think sprang from that meeting.

Ben and Rosalynde went home for lunch and he returned in the afternoon. Before then, to my delight, an ex-pupil and close family friend arrived and he added his own positive feelings to the small seed that had been sown a short while earlier.

John Nicholson is one of the success stories of my Youth Service career and one of my first Gold Award winners. During his visit that afternoon he told me of the time when he had become discouraged with the tremendous effort of going for a Gold Award plus the added slog of 'A' Level studies. I had taken him into my office and told him that no matter what the problems are, if something was worthwhile you did not give in but fought for it even harder, and I wouldn't let him quit. He said his final completion of his Gold and the subsequent visit to the Palace to meet Prince Philip had helped to change his life and he often thought of what might have happened if he had not listened to me that day. "Roles are now reversed," he said. "And now I am telling you not to give up. You have always been a fighter and this is just going to be another one of those battles you are going to win." With injections of hope, strength and love from people close to me like that, how could I lose?

Ben and Rosalynde arrived shortly afterwards and we all spent a surprisingly happy afternoon together. John left first. The time came for Rosalynde to rush Ben to Newcastle Airport for his flight back to London. I fought back the tears. I knew that as soon as they had gone the loneliness and the fear would creep back and I would miss him terribly. We had, however, arranged to go down to see him as soon as I got out of hospital and could travel, so I had that to look forward to and to sustain me.

A final bear hug from Ben, and more gentle kiss from Rosalynde, and I was alone again. But they left me with something inside which was never to leave me

– hope and belief in myself to fight the cancer with the support of all those near to me.

It might be natural to think at this stage of writing that during these nightmarish few days I hadn't given any thought to my beliefs as a Christian. But I had – constantly. I am a communicant member of the Church of England and occasionally attend church services at our local church. Throughout my life, in times of real crisis, I have done what every other person has done and turned to prayer when I have been really scared. Once things are back to normal it is always too easy just to revert to the usual occasional twinges of religious guilt. I am not a passionate believer; I have my doubts like everyone else and would dearly love to have some sign of revelation to convince me. I do, however, believe there is something behind all these earthly trappings and I feel comfortable with Christian beliefs and admire the teachings of Christ. I love my neighbours – well, most of them – and believe we should all help and care for each other when we can. I believe there is existence after death but I am unable to imagine the form. When I try, I start thinking of the millions and millions of human beings who have gone before and I cannot imagine how so many can find an eternal peace and be aware of it.

Well, there I was facing the greatest crisis of my life and with the great unknown staring me in the eye. I certainly didn't want to go there, but if I had to I definitely wanted a place in it. Naturally I prayed and begged and promised with as much conviction as I could muster. I was angry. Why me? What had I done to deserve this? The anger removed the fear for a while but fear is stronger than anger and it always crept back. Prayer and faith do help, there is no doubt about it, but they have to come after the confusion, anger and despair. Faith has to come slowly to mean anything, and not in the first rush of panic like a drowning man clutching at straws. That is how it began with me, but, out of all the confusion during these last years, I have found wonderful moments, usually in the peace and quiet of the countryside, in the early hours of the morning, and standing on top of a hill admiring the view. The higher you climb, the nearer to God is an apt expression at times like that.

During the next few days and the long wait for my biopsy results I slowly pulled myself together. I was swamped with cards and flowers and visitors. I had to steel myself every time someone came in to see me. All this, however, sustained me through the long wait for my results.

My earliest visitor was Dr Mary McElroy. She and her husband, Jack, are good friends of ours, brought together initially through our mutual interest in Victorian paintings. Jack and I had met at a Victorian painting exhibition some years earlier and our friendship had grown from then. Mary was a consultant radiologist and one of her responsibilities was to monitor the work of the Charlie Bear Scanner at the General Hospital. Jack was a consultant pathologist at a Sunderland Hospital.

I had woken early that morning and decided to attempt my first shower unaided. I had just shuffled into the shower room, pushing my drip trolley ahead of me, and was trying manfully to wash myself under the spray. It is no easy matter with

a drip feed line running from one hand and trying to keep the dressings from getting wet with the other. However, just doing something for yourself is part of the recovery process, and it worked for me. A nurse popped her head into the shower causing me instinctively to turn into a more modest position. "You've got a visitor," she said. "It must be a record at this time of the morning." It was just after 8 a.m.

Wondering who it was, and slightly peeved at the early intrusion into one of my greater efforts of independence, I shuffled back into the ward trying to dry myself properly at the same time. Mary, wearing a white medical coat, was sitting on my bed. She stood up and laughed at my predicament as I approached her.

It was good to see her and we chatted about my situation for a while. They had been on holiday and she had, therefore, missed seeing me at the Charlie Bear Scan Room. By the time she had returned my file had moved on and so she was unaware of the problem. Rosalynde had telephoned them the night before and they had been shocked at the news. Her matter of fact, cheerful talk lifted my spirits and she gave me a hug on leaving. She was the first doctor to say to me, "Don't give up hope; you might be surprised by the results." I thought long and hard about those words after she had gone and I reckon it was the first flicker of light in the medical darkness surrounding me. It turned out later that she had come into work very early that morning, had tracked down my scan results, analysed them, and her diagnosis was different from the surgeon's, but ethically she couldn't say anything to me. Her cheerful attitude did convey something to me though and I felt better for her visit.

Life is full of strange twists and turns. Another doctor friend who visited me asked me if I remembered his dreadful skiing when he had been a member of my ski party to Les Arcs in France during the 1985 winter. Skiing is one of my great outdoor loves and I enjoy teaching it as well as the activity itself. He is a good skier and I remember being surprised that week at how his standard had dropped since the previous trip. He was all over the place and had lost his dare-devil approach to the more difficult slopes. He had also dropped quietly out of our après ski antics and had started to excuse himself for early nights in bed. I hadn't thought much about it at the time as we all have off days, but he told me that, whilst showering that week, he had found a lump in his groin and of course couldn't do anything about it until our return to England. Being a doctor he suspected the worst and his fears had been confirmed back at his hospital the following week. After treatment he had made a full recovery and was now only going for periodic check-ups. His own early discovery, and subsequent rapid follow-up, had saved him from further complications and perhaps more severe treatment. Once again a doctor friend shone a little ray of light into the darkness.

My GP and neighbour came in to see me. I hadn't been looking forward to that meeting, because he had been with me from the start when we both thought and hoped that it was a mere stomach rupture. I also knew that he had carried out the difficult task of breaking the news to Rosalynde. He, too, was far from negative and after a momentary embarrassed greeting and the inevitable sympathy for my distressing news, he started talking to me about inner strength, the power of

the mind, and turning my own natural anger towards the tumour as a power source to destroy it. Strange things had happened in the medical world which they, as doctors, could not find an explanation for. He left me with more food for thought. A tiny molehill of positiveness was slowly beginning to grow.

My most unlikely visitor that week, who brought back the fear as soon as she introduced herself, was one of the newly appointed Macmillan Nurses based at the General Hospital. In a way a Macmillan Nurse carries the same and sadly inevitable image of a Hospice, which is very unfortunate because both are necessary and both deal with successful living as well as dignified dying, but it is the dying part which is most easily remembered and therefore to be avoided if possible. She was an experienced, fully qualified, hand-picked nurse with the unenviable task of talking to people with cancer and terminal illnesses and planning some sort of help for them when they are able to leave hospital. The idea is good and practical but it brings a chilling reality to the sufferer. We did not get off to a great start. I felt she was ill at ease and I didn't want to talk to her; it was like accepting my inevitable departure from this world. I took over the conversation by astounding her with the ironic information that a few months earlier I had presented her 'boss', Dr Atkinson, who was the father of my latest Community Programme Worker, with a cheque for £250. I had raised this by having half my beard shaved off at the Award Centre's Annual Christmas Dinner at Tynemouth Sixth Form College. The money had been raised to help the Macmillan Nursing Scheme at the General Hospital get started. That immediately broke the ice and we both relaxed and chatted pleasantly for about half an hour – not about preparation for dying but about our jobs and the strange coincidences of life. She left saying she could see I didn't need any help at the moment but she was always there if I did.

About twenty minutes later her boss, Dr Vel Atkinson, appeared in the ward looking rather shocked and we talked together for a long time. At that time I knew Vel's wife, Anne, better than him, through my ski party organising activities with North Tyneside LEA. Schools Abroad was a leading National Ski Company and Anne worked as their North East Co-ordinator. For once we didn't talk about cancer but the conversation turned naturally to skiing and Vel mentioned the Newcastle General Hospital Ski Association, which was to play an important part in my coping with, and recovering from, chemotherapy treatment later on.

The week slowly passed and as I gained strength both physically and mentally, I began to renew my friendship with my fellow patients and nurses. At times we had so much fun I forgot about my predicament and the ever approaching biopsy result. The worst time was at night when the ward was settling down to sleep and there wasn't much else to do but lie and think. Laughter is a tonic in itself and after Ben's hilarious entrance I found it was possible to laugh again.

One morning I surprised the nurses by attempting some basic Yoga exercises on top of my bed. They gathered around curiously watching me struggle in particular with an exercise called 'rocking the baby' where you have to lift and bend your leg and hold it close to your chest and rock from side to side as though you had a baby in your arms. The next few minutes saw the nurses standing and some

squatting as they tried to beat each other in copying my contortions. The arrival of Sister soon put a stop to it, as she sent them back to their duties amidst grins of delight from the rest of us. Yoga exercises became a daily part of my routine after that. It was Rosalynde who had introduced me to them when we were holidaying together in Tenerife during the previous summer. She has attended Yoga classes for years and, though I had organised many as part of my job, I had never really been interested. It was as though Yoga had entered my life at a timely moment, in order to help me when it was needed. It was certainly helping me now both physically and mentally.

I remember another morning when I was lying flat on my back, meditating and very relaxed, with my eyes closed. I had just finished deep breathing exercises and was mentally walking in the Cheviots following one of my many routes through the hills, when way in the distance I dimly heard a voice saying, "It's okay doctor, George is just floating around in space; he will be back in a minute." I opened my eyes and saw the ward round of doctors all peering curiously down at me.

I said, "Morning, sorry, I didn't know you were here, but I'm okay, honest." The accompanying nurse explained about my foibles, and they moved on smiling and shaking their heads. So much for eccentricity! Anyway it helped with the relationship because after that they pulled my leg instead of trying to treat me over-sympathetically.

I had a surprise visit from my surgeon on the Saturday. He sat on my bed again and asked me how I was coping. He said he'd heard about all my antics in the ward and was very pleased with both my healing powers and my spirited approach to the situation. He then said he was going to London for a meeting on Monday and wouldn't be around when my biopsy results appeared. His next comment sent an electric spark running up my back. "I have made some tentative enquiries with the Pathology Laboratory people and they are having some difficulty coming to a conclusion about your results. I don't want to build your hopes up, but when this occurs it opens up unexpected possibilities. I thought it might help you to know this as you face the weekend. They will definitely have your results on Monday morning. My Senior Registrar will see you during the ward round and I will see you when I get back."

He left me almost as stunned as he had when first breaking the news to me a few days earlier. My mind raced with the possibilities. What if it wasn't cancer, was the first, but I quickly pushed that to one side. That was too much to hope for.

Another seed had been sown and it was to grow as the weekend advanced. I told Rosalynde as soon as she came in and she was as thrilled as I was. "Do you remember what I said to you in the car on the way in to hospital about the good feeling I had? Well I still have it." This was typical of Rosalynde's attitude over the past few days. She was a tower of strength. I noticed too that every time she came in to see me she wore different clothes and always looked radiant despite the strain she must have been under. Later when I asked her about this she said it was part of her own special effort to cheer me up and bolster my spirits. Back at home though it must have been a different story, and I can imagine the loneliness

and fear that she had to face without me.

Finally the long awaited but dreaded moment arrived. I had forced myself as soon as I awoke on Monday morning to go through my normal routine. I really wanted to hide under the bedclothes but I showered, shaved, did my Yoga and tried to be cheerful as the minutes ticked by on the large wall clock above the ward entrance. Everyone knew my results were expected and they all did their best to cheer me up, but it wasn't easy. The ward doors opened and the white coated harbingers of life and death entered and moved slowly to the first bed. I was halfway up the ward and couldn't expect them to break tradition and come straight to me. I watched them for any signs which could allay my growing fears and apprehension, but they meticulously kept their attention to the patient in hand and I just had to sweat it out.

As they approached the bed, I braced myself, took a deep breath and crossed my fingers. My mouth was dry and my heart was thumping. This was it! I looked at the Senior Registrar and recognised him as being the doctor who had met me on my return to the hospital after the Scan results. I felt my chest tighten and knew I was going to have difficulty breathing if the suspense lasted any longer. He smiled at me and spoke words I will never forget: "Good morning, Mr Walker. I am delighted to tell you I have received the biopsy results and the news is better than we had dared to hope for. You have cancer, but it is not of the pancreas, it is lymphoma cancer of the non-Hodgkins type and, more importantly, can be treated."

One of the lady doctors said, "We were all thrilled for you when we saw the results. We have been keeping our fingers crossed for you all this time too." I expelled a long pent up breath of air. I hadn't realised I had been holding my breath all this time, and a voice I didn't recognise as my own croaked out my overwhelming thanks to them.

The Registrar relieved my emotional response by continuing professionally, "Mr Petty will be back tomorrow. I am sure he will come straight in to talk to you. In the meantime staff nurse will arrange for you to telephone your wife and tell her the news."

They all moved on to the next bed, leaving me bursting with the most wonderful feeling I have ever experienced. It was as though a massive weight had been lifted off me and I felt like yelling out my joy to the whole ward. "I am going to live!" kept rushing into my mind, "I am going to live!"

When the ward round was completed and the doctors had left, the nurses rushed over to say how pleased they were for me. The whole ward was buzzing. I was overwhelmed by their concern. Staff Nurse took me to the office where she left me to telephone the news to Rosalynde. Rosalynde actually answered the phone and my voice broke as I told her the news. There was a silence at the other end and I heard her stifle a sob and say "Oh George, thank God." It was a tearfully happy moment and Rosalynde said that she would be in as soon as possible. I had no sooner got back to my bed when Staff Nurse came after me saying that Dr Wagget from the Royal Victoria Infirmary wanted to speak to me. John is Consultant Paediatrician at the RVI and has been a neighbour and close friend of

the family for twenty odd years. I hobbled back to the phone and told him the news. I could hear him break down with emotion and I started crying too. He managed to compose himself – I couldn't – and he said he would be in touch when he had pulled himself together.

Life is amazing, I had just been confirmed as having cancer and everyone including myself was acting as though the greatest thing in the world had happened to me. I was very touched by the unabashed response to the news from everyone.

The only thing that happened to quell the enthusiasm of facing life again, happened the following day when the surgeon came straight in to see me. His response should have been expected, but I was still riding on the crest of a euphoric wave. He was, of course, delighted with the news and said so immediately, but his lifetime of experience had taught him to face the facts and the facts were I had cancer and it could still kill me. He made me realise that even though the prognosis was good I had a long hard fight ahead of me if I was to win. The medical profession would utilise all its resources in the fight but I could play my part too and continue to be as positive as I had been in the last few days. His last words brought me momentarily back to earth with a bump. "The disease may kill you one day, but it could be in twenty or thirty years time." When he left I determined to prove him wrong and die peacefully in my bed, of ripe old age. Then I thought, "Well, hell, thirty years on is going to take me to eighty anyway and it's a damned sight better than the twelve weeks I had yesterday." On top of that I was going to give that tumour such a pounding it wouldn't want to be around for long. However, they were sensible practical words given by a professional and were to set my course of action for the months that followed.

That afternoon John Titterington and Ken Hall arrived to see me. They were linked with my days as a Deputy Headteacher at Longbenton High School. John was the member of staff there who had been seconded to help me with the Youth Review and Kenny was an ex-pupil and youth club member from those days. I had made some wonderful friends from the young people who touched on my life through the Youth Service and Kenny was one of them. He had a sense of humour second to none and I can recall many hilarious moments with him on ski trips and weekends in the outdoors. They approached my bed with the same forced expression of jollity that everyone else had tried to perfect since the original news broke out. I was tempted to milk the situation but it seemed cruel, so I burst out with the news and told them they were the first of my visitors to know. It was really good to see the relief spread across their faces and they settled down for almost two hours as we reminisced about old times.

I think everyone in the ward wondered who my two visitors were and what was causing the sudden outbursts of laughter every now and then. I felt so much better by the time they both left after promising them that I would give them a game of golf as soon as I was strong enough. Golf – another activity which was to play an important part in my recovery from chemotherapy treatment. I had never been a very good golfer, but I could tot up a reasonable score when on form. At that moment golf, in fact, was taking up a lot of my time in the ward. The 1988

Open was on the television and I spent enthralled hours watching the greats make it look easy. On the last afternoon I even dragged my visitors over to the communal television and made them watch the last dramatic moments when Severiano Ballesteros won the title. You had to watch really closely because the television picture was so faint you could hardly see the action.

Like the Open and everything else, things come to an end and the next day, Monday, the doctors told me that my operation wound had healed remarkably quickly so much so they were going to let me go home that afternoon. I telephoned Rosalynde and arranged for her to bring my clothes in and give me a lift home.

I had mixed feelings for the rest of the day. I was really looking forward to going home but somehow I'd built up a feeling of security within the caring atmosphere of the ward and of course had warm relationships with the staff and patients. They all knew and understood the situation; outside I would have to start again facing the sympathy of my friends and neighbours and repeating the recent events to one and all.

It was a sunny afternoon. Rosalynde arrived with my clothes and presents from both of us for the staff. I dressed and said my goodbyes to the people who had cared for me and shared my experience. Sister asked if we could go into the consulting room as the Consultant wanted to speak to us before we left. She then gave me a letter for my GP and an appointment card for Outpatients with an appointment for three weeks ahead to have my post-operation check-up. I wondered what would happen next about the tumour but that was answered by the Consultant during the next few minutes.

He said that as my cancer was blood related I would be referred to a haematologist. If we didn't have any objection he was going to ask Dr Proctor, the Consultant in charge of the Haematology Department at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, to take my case, but there was no guarantee. He said that in this field, Dr Proctor had a reputation second to none and I couldn't be in better hands. We, naturally, had no objections and were delighted with this information and offer. The next step would be a letter from Dr Proctor if he accepted me onto his list of patients and that would take two to three weeks. In any case, they would not start treating me until I had fully recovered from the major surgery which I had just undergone. He wished me luck.

Eleven days after entering Newcastle General Hospital, I stepped off the wheelchair which had taken me to the entrance and made my first steps into sunshine and the open air. I stood for a moment and absorbed the warmth of the sunshine and the mounting feeling of freedom and elation at just being outside again. A short car journey later, I was home. Marc, Roxanne and Yasha our Russian Blue cat, were waiting to greet me.

It was good to be home. After hugging Marc and Roxanne and giving them the news, I sat down in the lounge and breathed in the atmosphere of home.

I didn't sit long; I felt restless. All the way from the hospital, I slowly became aware of how bright colours were. I had the same feeling at home. It would, I imagine, be similar but on a smaller scale, to a blind man suddenly being able to

see. I experienced this again as I looked at my paintings on the walls. It wasn't a technicolour effect, just a heightening of colour sensation. I had an urge to walk in the garden which at that time of the year was in the height of bloom. I was not disappointed, the flowers were in full display and the colours were gorgeous. I walked around as though in a trance just absorbing the simple but wonderful exhibition. It wasn't just the flowers, even my vegetables had the same glow about them. If I had to explain, I would have said I was experiencing real awareness of life, perhaps for the first time.