

# Treasure

Bill's story told by Gill

*“A fresh bounce in your step as you made the tea, everything done so precisely.  
The spring in your step was the song in my heart.”*



Every ending has to have a beginning, so that is where I will start – the beginning of my husband's end of life. My husband William (whom we will call Bill, which he preferred) had not been a well man for a number of years. In 1984 Bill was very ill with heart problems and underwent open heart surgery for a valve replacement after which his life changed. There were a number of things he was no longer able to do. Gardening was one of his passions, even though I had to point out which were weeds and which were plants.

Bill had spent many years working in hospitals as a theatre porter and had seen many patients to and from their operations. He was a compassionate man, especially with children. When he took a child to theatre he would put on a funny hat to comfort them. He was a people's friend. He carried on working as long as he could, but it was in a different capacity. Because of his heart problems, which effectively caused his body to slow down, his work involvement became very limited. Hospital visits became more frequent due to unstable angina.

By this time he was working for Social Services. Bill would be on the door, directing the public to various departments and sorting the mail out. He loved his job - again it was about meeting and helping others. As time went on his hours at work became less. Even though it was part-time his unstable angina and not being fully functional to carry out his duties meant he was eventually certified medically unfit. He found it hard not to be working and helping with the family income.

We had two children, a son, Philip, who lives in Yorkshire and a daughter, Stephanie. Going back to the time just before his heart surgery, it was the year our daughter was married, 1984. Bill, although not well at that time, was determined to walk our daughter down the aisle. He was very unsteady on his feet, but, oh boy, was he a proud man.

As time passed, which brings me to the beginning of the next chapter in his life, Bill began to have a lot of back pain. He also had pains in his legs. The pains in his legs were not unusual because of his poor circulation, and did not cause too much concern. Then he had problems with his plumbing as I called it, but because he was on so much medication, which caused him to use the bathroom more frequently, it sort of masked another underlying problem.

I became concerned when his visits to the bathroom became not only frequent, but his length of

time spent there became longer. So on our next visit to the GP I mentioned it. The doctor then gave us a few words of information about what was needed to be done. Within two weeks Bill received an appointment from the hospital to see a consultant, who on the visit confirmed abnormalities of the prostate, which would require further investigations.

Our next visit to the consultant was for the results after having a body scan. We set off with mixed feelings, not really knowing what to expect. On arriving at the side room on the second floor we found it full of patients waiting to be seen by consultants. We found seats and waited for Bill's name to be called. I looked around and wondered if they were all there for the same reason.

I looked for the consultancy nursing specialist hoping she would be there, as we had met her on our first visit. I found her to be a very warm and reassuring person. There was a TV in the room – I glanced at it occasionally but my thoughts were elsewhere.

Eventually, Bill's name was called by the consultancy nursing specialist. "Come on William, how have you been?" she said. She had a warm smile as she looked across at Bill. She is the kind of person that has a way about her that gives you a feel good factor about yourself. It lifts your spirits up whatever your thoughts or feelings are at the time. We took our places, each looking at each other (that is Bill and myself). Then the crunch came. The consultant explained the situation and confirmed that it was prostate cancer, but there were also secondaries. It had gone into his bones. I can't really explain my feeling and thoughts at that point. Bill turned and looked at me. We clasped each other's hand.

When we were told the consultant said the good news was that it was treatable and that Bill would receive injections in the lower stomach area near the groin. I was listening, but at the same time my thoughts seemed to be far off as though it was a dream I suppose. But no, this was reality.

The injections (Zoladex) would be administered by the nurse and would be for about two years or until his body needed different or stronger medication. Our first visit for the injection was one of apprehension – would it work? Our lovely nurse was again very reassuring. The injection was given on the right side, with a small dressing applied. It was then that I asked her the main question. Now my mind was clearer, as was Bill's. "The consultant said it was treatable, but is it curable?" I said to her. The Nurse knew what I was going to ask. Her reply was no, but she said there were treatments such as injections that could help to slow the progression rate down.

Again she had that way of putting your mind at ease. Our next visit to her was quite funny really. Before going to the hospital Bill shaved the space for the injection. He just smiled at her and said "I have come prepared". "Well I'm sorry William, but it's the left side this time, we alternate the injections" she replied. We just laughed about it. I was glad Bill had seen the funny side of it, although he had a very dry sense of humour. On the way home from our visit with the results, we just had a time of silence, each with our own thoughts. "Well that's that then" Bill said, but what he meant was "well now we know".

The next part of Bill's life, plus my own, was to accept the situation. We both attended church and had a lot of faith. I knew that whatever we thought, said or did would not alter the situation or circumstances. We had to come to a point of acceptance to enable us to move forward to be able to cope with the weeks and months ahead of us. Bill was very strong, he had an inner

strength that kept him going. He didn't let anything faze him. We accepted each day as it came and I treated each day as normal.

Eventually, time took its toll on Bill's body. Pain was becoming a real factor. He could not have certain medication because of his heart problems.

Our next appointments to see the consultant were via a wheelchair, which Bill at one stage was reluctant to use. Our nurse, as usual, was there and I saw the compassion that she had when she saw the pain Bill was in. It was then arranged for him to stay in hospital for palliative care. He became upset because he had told me from the start that he did not want to lie in a hospital bed or hospice. He had been in and out of hospital for a number of years with other problems. I promised that I would take care of him at home, after all I had worked for social services for a number of years in the caring profession, plus I had nursing experience. Having said that, it is a different ball game when it is your loved one. Once again, the nurse reassured him and told him that he would only be there for his course of treatment to be sorted out so that life would be more comfortable for him.

Yes, he did come back home. The nurse had contacted Bridges, a support group, also Hospice at Home. These support groups proved to be invaluable. By this time Bill was confined to his chair. I had already reverted to single beds so that it was easier for me to attend to him. Of course in due time it was easier for two to assist, one either side of the bed.

Bill was a typical family man and loved his grandchildren. It was nearing the end of September and his thoughts were on Christmas so that we could still do our Christmas shopping together, I got the Argos catalogue and Woolworth's and any books that Bill requested to see and look through. By the end of October we had our gifts all bought and wrapped up. We had achieved it together.

It really touched me that on Christmas day, nearly three weeks after he died there was a gift for me. There was even a Christmas card saying that he was thinking about me.

Bill was deteriorating slowly and noticeably. His eating habits became different. In a long part of his last few years he had always been careful of his food intake, i.e. low fat et cetera, because of his heart condition. I asked him one day what he would like for tea. "Proper chips" was his reply. He meant home made. I had not cooked those for a long time. I hadn't got a fryer, because it had been so long. So I purchased one that day and we had 'proper chips' for tea. I must admit, not only was it good to see Bill eating, but also I enjoyed them myself. Whatever Bill requested I endeavoured to supply. Although he was not eating a lot, at least he enjoyed what he had. At the end of the day, did it really matter what he ate? A healthy diet was not the issue at that time.

He was a very determined man. He did not want to use the commode. Once when he did I couldn't get him off it. He was really trying to get up but it was sapping his energy. It was in the night. "Let me call for one of the carers" I said. It was painful for him because he had bedsores and because he was on warfarin. If he bled he would really bleed.

I mentioned earlier that the nurse had put us on to Bridges, a support group. We had literature

come through the post as she had already registered us with them. The next step was a visit from them. I think at that time I had a few mixed feelings. Although we had come to terms with the situation, this was to be a sort of confirmation that Bill's life had reached another stage. Bridges told us of the support they offer. The staff were very caring and provided genuine support for us. There were a couple of times when we had to travel from the hospital. Bridges supplied the taxi fare, or if they had transport available then we had a driver supplied by them. Bridges helped to take any worries or concerns off us regarding financial help to and from the hospital.

There came a time when Bill was in hospital again for a blood transfusion. Again our nurse reassured him that he would not be in long. It was on this occasion that our daughter met the nurse and had time for a chat about her dad. The nurse is a very busy person, but she always found time to answer questions or give professional advice. Stephanie our daughter had high praise for her. She, or should I say we as a family, knew that Bill was receiving the best possible care.

As time went on the treatment for Bill was not working. Another scan proved to us that his bones were becoming weaker. This was when Hospice at Home started to call. They would monitor his pain and adjust morphine when necessary. Hospice at Home became part of the family. We met most of the team, but one of the specialist palliative care nurses was who we saw more of. The first time they came, as soon as the front door was opened, it was as though we had known them for a while, like 'one of the family'.

On a Thursday the Hospice at Home care assistant would come and sit with Bill while I had some time out. I have a friend, Kath, and when we would be ready to go out Bill always gave me some money and would say "that's for you and Kath to have something to eat and drink". Each time we shopped Bill would always ask me to bring chocolate raisins, scotch egg and a box of Dairy Lea cheese spreads. As soon as we returned he would request a cheese triangle and enjoy devouring it.

There were times when Kath would visit and we would be doing a jigsaw puzzle. Bill would be asleep in his chair, or so we thought, because sometimes we would be talking and all of a sudden Bill would reply to perhaps something we had said with an amusing little quip. On one occasion we were doing a puzzle and had got a box of chocolates open. Kath suddenly said "oh I've managed to fit a piece of the puzzle in". "Have another chocolate" Bill replied his eyes still shut. We looked across at him. He had a broad grin on his face. We just laughed.

Bill developed pressure sores so district nurses were coming in three times a week. The district nurses were also very approachable and friendly. Our home was becoming a hive of activity. Although I managed to take care of Bill myself, washing, getting him out of bed, it became apparent that it needed two people to handle him. By this time we had obtained a hospital bed. It was a great help when it came to getting Bill in and out of bed. Also it was more comfortable for him.

I tried to give Bill as much independence as possible. When it came to drinks I purchased a non-spill mug from the chemist so that he could have a drink and not have me standing over him in case he spilt it or dozed off to sleep with it still in his hand, which was often the case. He would always be sorry if he caused extra washing with accidents, or got me up in the night for whatever the reason. But I would just reassure him and say it was OK. If it had been the other way round

he would have done the same for me. We were there for each other, no matter what.

Bill would often talk about his grandchildren. Nerissa, Stephanie's eldest daughter, who was fourteen at the time, would text me every morning enquiring about her granddad before going to school. Her text would read "Hi Nan, how's Granddad? - Truth". So I would text back with the truth. I think it is important that we are open and honest to the truth when children ask for it. Nerissa was only just fourteen but her lasting memories of her granddad are that she knew the truth about why he is no longer with us. She had a good tutor at school who was her mentor. Obviously, she misses her granddad, but she knows that he is out of any pain and suffering.

During the day of Wednesday 6th December, Bill became very quiet and did not want to be disturbed. A carers group had been coming in to help me with his personal care. Bill, on that morning, was very weak and did not want the bother of being messed about with. I gently washed his hands and face myself. He stayed in bed and was asleep more than awake. I spent most of the day in the bedroom with him. The district nurse came and saw the situation and left him to rest, but told me that if I needed her to give her a call.

During the night that followed Bill's breathing had changed. I had been awake as usual in case he needed me. I knew within my heart that it was the turning point. When daylight appeared I got dressed and made myself a drink, then sat in the bedroom talking to Bill and stroking his hand. He squeezed my hand and gently said that I was a 'treasure'. I told him that he was too. We are all treasures.

During the last few days prior to 6th December we decided as a family not to have any more visitors, that is outside visitors. We have lots of friends at church and on occasions they would visit, but we decided that we needed quality time together as a family. When Bill was first diagnosed we had a week away with my daughter, son-in-law and the two girls, Nerissa and Bryony. It will be a holiday the girls will always remember.

7th December. It was now 9 am. I telephoned my daughter to inform her of her dad's deterioration. The district nurse was not due to call that day, but I knew that Hospice at Home would be with me shortly. When she arrived it was not the specialist palliative care nurse, as I think she was on holiday, but nevertheless even though I hadn't met this lady before it was just like I had. She did inform me that Bill was quite poorly and it didn't matter if I left his medication, which at this point he would not have been able to swallow. Our GP was asked to call in.

The Pastor of our church rang to enquire on how Bill was doing. When I explained he came straight away and waited with me until Steph arrived with Haydn, my son-in-law. They stayed for a while then had to go, but would return later. The GP came and explained that there was nothing more really that could be done. He was very caring and waited for a short while with me, as my son Phillip was on his way from Yorkshire. We just sat talking about life itself and Bill's situation. The GP had to go as he too was a busy man. He did say that it was good that he came. I think he was interested in Bill's life history.

My son arrived with Joshua, his youngest son. By now it was mid-afternoon. I just sat by Bill's bed talking to him. Kath arrived and she came and we sat on my bed reflecting on the past few

weeks. We both knew that it would not be long before Bill would slip away. Joshua came into the room. He was ten years old. Kath looked at me and said “do you think he should be in here?” I thought for a moment, after all it was his granddad he had come to see. I didn’t reply. It was just then that Bill slipped away, out of his suffering and pain. I thank God that he did not suffer too much unbearable pain, which does happen with bone cancer.

Our son Phil and daughter Steph came in, but Josh who was present just got up, went to his granddad, took hold of his hand, kissed him and said “goodbye, Grandad”. That night my son and family stayed. Bill had been taken. His hospital bed lay empty. I got into bed, looked across to where he had been lying and I whispered good night and God bless. Suddenly a little person came and crept into bed with me – it was Josh. His mom and dad looked into the bedroom and asked if he was okay being there. I looked at Josh and asked if he wet the bed. “No” he quickly replied. “That’s OK then, you can stay” I said. Then I nudged him after a minute or two and said “I forgot to tell you, I do.”

Next thing was the funeral arrangements. Kath, my friend, was with me. Steph was not able to be there through seeing to family. The funeral went well, although it’s like going through the motions. It’s like wondering if it’s a dream. At a later date we had a celebration service of Bill’s life. Although tributes were paid at the funeral, this was a chance for everyone else that wanted to pay tribute to do so. We had been in the church for a number of years, working with the young people as well as the elderly. I was surprised at how much impact we had made on other people. The youth paid their respects through song and dance and Nerissa was one of them. She had also done a poem. We also gave a cheque to Hospice at Home and the specialist palliative care nurse had come to receive it. I had also invited Bill’s key nurse and to my delight she was able to attend. Hospice at Home gave a few words on their role in the community. Bill’s nurse, after being put on the spot, explained who she was. In all it was a very good day. We had refreshments and the church was full of well wishers for myself and the family.

In all this I think coping with it after accepting the situation has made me a stronger person. When I first learnt about it I knew that I had to be strong for my children. My reactions would reflect on them and consequently they had to be strong for my grandchildren (their children). The grandchildren attended the funeral. I think it’s important that children see life as it really is; they know the closing chapter to Grandad’s life. Perhaps later in their lives they won’t be asking questions about it, but giving answers to others in the same situation. Throughout all this I know that our faith in God gave both Bill and I an inner strength that saw us through and enabled us to see beyond our capabilities and situation.

This is not the end of the story. It is just goodbye for a little while. One day we shall meet again in the presence of our Lord and Saviour and that is the hope, which keeps us, going. Accepting the situation does not mean you have given up. It means that you are dealing with it and it does make you stronger for what is to come.

The following days and weeks I was kept busy sorting things out. It is a strange feeling when your home, which was once a very busy hive of activity, changes. All of a sudden you have lost your loved one and the professional friends that you had coming in each day. I say friends because that’s what they became, as I said before, part of the family. Now you are on your own but then life goes on. Hospice at Home came to see me to see how I was coping.

I was pleased when they invited me to an afternoon tea with them and with others in the same situation, but it also gave me a chance to meet again with the team that had been very much part of our life while Bill was so poorly. Their presence at such a sensitive time was invaluable and much appreciated. They were a listening ear outside of family and professional help and advice on various issues – medication of morphine. They helped make life more comfortable for Bill to be at home.

I've lived with multiple losses.

My mother died in 1945. Me and my twin brother were born in 1941. I think she was only about twenty-five years old when she died of TB and pleurisy. Then there was no cure.

We were sent to a children's home in Erdington. At the time my father was a prisoner of war. We were only seven when my father came home. To get your children back in those days the man had to either get a nanny or remarry. He remarried. She was the archetypal wicked stepmother. This scar on my chin is from her kicking me in the face. She would lock me in the coal house. Once when I was in there I heard a voice calling my name Gillian. I felt at peace. I thought it was my mother's voice. When my stepmother realised that I wasn't scared by the coal cellar any more she stopped putting me in there. She didn't do the same things to my sister because she was deaf and dumb. It was the window cleaner who reported the cruelty. My dad knew about it but there were issues with him too. He went to prison.

So I went back to the children's home. Erdington Cottage Homes. You were stigmatised if you were in a children's home. Initially me and my brother went together, but he was in home seven and I was in home twelve. I was in Windy Ridge.

An ambulance came up the drive and took my brother. They told me he would come back but he never did. I met him years later but not then. I kept running up the path wanting and waiting for him to come back. My sister was in another home.

I have a photo of us with her.

Also sadly a few years ago my son's child had a cot death. I got an early morning phone call. There was just this silence then "it's me". "What's wrong?" I said. "We've lost her" my son replied. He said his daughter's name. The last time we'd seen her was at her christening. She was nearly nine months when she died. My daughter was expecting at the same time. I thought I'd have to tell Bill the truth. "She's died" I said. Neither of us fell back asleep again. I couldn't wait for morning to come. The following morning I tried to phone my daughter to tell her but she wasn't there so I phoned my son in law. He works at a bank. "He's at the hospital at the moment" the receptionist there said. My daughter had gone into hospital. She'd had a miscarriage. I wished I could have dropped everything and gone.

My son carried that little coffin all the way to the grave. It was as though the whole village turned out. It was snowing.

Now to help me cope I keep busy. I am an active member in the church and help with the chil-

dren's club, and both Bill and myself helped with this for a number of years. I tend to set myself targets, visiting places and people. I also write inspirational verse.

My grandchildren are never far away, especially Nerissa the older one – fifteen years old. She still texts me every day. I think I now text more than using the phone by voice, although I do text my sister who is deaf and dumb. I keep myself busy, but there is never a day when Bill is not in my thoughts. There is always something that jolts your memory. Little things that make you smile and remember the good times.

Life is like an eternal flame or candle within, it never really goes out. Not only do we recall memories, but our children have their thoughts and memories, as do our grandchildren. Memories of good times or perhaps not so good. Through words spoken. Times of laughter. Memories that are passed down, to live on in the heart of others.