

'Finding my feet without you'

When my dreams of a happy retirement with my wife were snatched away, I had to find a new path. By Tracey Howe, 61

Dear Angela,

I'll never forget the first time we met. I was working as physiotherapist and you were studying to become a nurse.

We passed each other in our shared nursing accommodation and instantly caught each other's eyes.

'Hi, I'm Tracey,' I said, and with the ice broken, we became friends, finding any excuse we could to hang out.

We soon realised our feelings went deeper and started dating. But because of the times, we felt it best to keep our love a secret.

'We're best friends,' we'd say if anyone asked.

But after you'd qualified as a nurse, we knew we wanted to move in together.

'It's tiring keeping secrets,' you said, and I agreed.

So we settled down together and, after having our two wonderful sons, Will and Danny, our life was filled with love, fun times and amazing memories.

Once the boys were grown up and had flown the nest,

we made plans for our retirement together.

'Let's do what we've always talked about and get a campervan,' you suggested. 'So we can finally make our way across Britain.'

'That's an amazing idea,' I agreed.

But then I began to notice a change in you.

You were snappy and irritable, and you were struggling with simple tasks like loading the dishwasher.

You were forgetful too.

By now, we were in lockdown, so I wondered if that was what was getting you down.

But when I was talking to you about a holiday we'd been on and you couldn't remember it, I began to worry.

'What if this is early onset dementia?' I said.

Then one day, out of nowhere, you suffered a seizure and were rushed to hospital. After tests and scans the doctor called us into a room to talk about the results.

'You have a benign brain tumour,' he said.

I held your hand and we fought back tears as he explained it was the size of a tennis ball and you'd need surgery to remove it.

Thankfully, the operation was a success and afterwards, it was like someone had



You and me on holiday

flipped a switch and brought back the old you.

'I feel amazing,' you told me as you recovered.

But shortly after your brain surgery, you developed a sudden back pain.

'I'm sure it'll pass,' you said, brushing it off.

Only it didn't, and we ended up in A&E where you had blood tests.

Days later, we were back at the hospital, sitting in front of another doctor delivering more devastating news. You'd developed two rare forms of blood cancer – myeloma and amyloidosis.

He told us the myeloma was one of the most aggressive forms he'd ever seen, and you were started on chemotherapy immediately.

But the cancer was so advanced that it didn't work,

and we sobbed as you were given a terminal diagnosis, with doctors estimating you had a year to live.

'I want to be at home,' you told me, so we set up a bed for you and had NHS and Marie Curie nurses coming in to help care for you.

I spent my days by your bedside.

The boys would visit a lot too and we'd talk about happy times we'd spent together as a family.

To keep my mind busy and escape what was happening for a while, I listened to a lot of audiobooks, including *Wild*, a memoir about a woman who hiked solo along the Pacific Crest Trail in the US, and *Coasting*, about a woman who ran 5000 miles around the coast of Britain.

As your final days



Us on our wedding day

approached, friends and family visited to say goodbye.

We gathered loved ones together for your 58th birthday too. We all raised a glass to you and while you were tired, you kept smiling.

'Thanks so much for coming,' you told everyone.

But soon, you began drifting in and out of consciousness, and it was just me and the boys beside you as the end came.

'I love you, Angela,' I said as you took your final breath.

Will and Danny were my rocks as we held your funeral two weeks on.

Afterwards, overcome with grief, I struggled to come to terms with being a widow.

I'd lost all my confidence and needed something to help me cope.

Thinking about those memoirs I'd listened to gave me an idea, and I booked myself on an organised trek across the Sahara desert.

Although I was nervous

going alone, I met some amazing people in the group.

'I can't remember the last time I laughed this hard,' I told them one night.

As we walked, an idea grew too.

'I'm going to trek across Britain in Angela's memory,' I told my new hiking friends.

'Do it!' they all encouraged.

We'd planned to see more of the UK together but had never got the

chance, so it felt like the perfect tribute.

I decided to raise

money for different charities too, including

some who'd helped you like Marie Curie, and the Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre, where you were treated. But others too, including Brains Trust, CoppaFeel and Breast Cancer Now.

To prepare, I asked my GP for help to improve my fitness, plotted a 5000-mile, year-long route around Britain's coastlines, went on a mountain navigation and first-aid course, and walked Snowdon at night.

I bought a motorhome to live in along the way too, and named her Priscilla, after the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

Danny joined me and our pooch Poppy for the first day of my trek. But after he'd gone, I was left to my own devices.

I covered on average 18 miles a day, and the solitude gave me time to reflect on

our lives together, the wonderful memories we'd shared, our gorgeous boys.

One thought I carried around with me was how I was going to carry on without you.

We'd been part of each other's lives for so long, it wasn't going to be easy.

Some days both that thought and the trek were tough. The weather would be against me, the pace draining.

'This is a lot,' I'd think, battling through wind and rain.

At the start, I felt anger. I was furious that the brain tumour robbed us of you,

and how it changed your personality.

And that the cancers had then come along and stolen the future we'd planned.

But as I made my way around the west

coast of Britain, I became calmer and I gradually had time to process my loss.

Spring and summer soon rolled around, and the blazing hot days were just as challenging.

Before I set off, people crocheted me small hearts, as I planned to give out one to someone at every mile.

And when Olympic diver Tom Daley read about my story, he was so touched he sent some he'd made for me to give out too.

Whenever I gave a heart away, I'd tell the recipient, 'That's for you to remember somebody you've loved and lost.'

'I love the thought

of Britain being circled by a chain of little love hearts,' one person said when I explained what I was doing.

Speaking to people along the way helped me cope with your loss too.

I've learnt a lot about grief and love from some of the strangers I've met.

'Grief is love with nowhere to go,' one woman told me, and that has stayed with me.

Grief shouldn't be so taboo and I hope what I've been doing helps start conversations about coping with loss.

Now, as I near the end of my trek, I hope too that I've made you proud.

You've been with me, in my heart, every step of the way. And I'll carry you there forever.

Love always, Tracey x

● To follow Tracey's journey and find out about the charities she's supporting, visit traceystrek.uk



Me crossing the English border



Me celebrating my 3000th mile