

## Introduction

On March 8, 2018, my world was shattered. Crystle, my wife of over 36 years passed away at the age of 58. She had been diagnosed with incurable brain cancer. It was an inevitable outcome that my mind had refused to acknowledge. Until it happened. We were entering our retirement years and looking forward to spending time with family and friends at our new home in Niagara.

If this book has spoken to you it is most likely that you, too, have suffered the loss of a loved one. In these pages I share my journey through grief in hopes that it may help you find some nugget of truth to help you defeat grief, for it is a terrible place to linger. I have learned two truths that I believe will be certainties for everyone taking the unwanted trip through the emotionally oppressive space of grief:

1 - No two journeys will be the same. I attended a grief therapy group just a few months after Crystle had passed away. It was a very neutral experience for me, but I know for certain it helped others. It does not mean either of us are somehow wrong, or not doing the things we should be doing to heal. There is no correct set of steps that one must take. Your intuition will tell you what the best choice is for you; trust your intuition.

2 - You will be a changed person. Whether for better or worse, I believe that no man or woman walks the path of grief and comes out the other side the same person. If you can defeat grief you will emerge stronger.

Crystle was, and for me, she will always be my soul mate. I do not use that term lightly. I recently penned in my journal that time is not mitigating our love to a warm memory. For me, it is still very much alive and growing stronger, as I move further past that dreadful day. Crystle and I spent much of our time together. It never really mattered to either one of us what we were doing as long as we were together. We could have been on vacation or snuggled together at home on the couch. We simply wanted to be together.

I was often fortunate to be her chauffeur. When the weather would turn bad, Crystle would turn on the charm and ask me to drive her to work. I am sure she felt that I was doing something special for her over and above the call of duty I had as her husband. But the truth is I cherished those fifteen minutes driving her to and from work. She was my rock. The more time I spent with her the more I felt grounded. And I confess I even looked forward to the times Crystle would *allow* me to go shopping with her. This was a privilege, for Crystle loved to shop alone. She pattered. She zigged and she zagged. She pondered. She picked things up and put them back. I am sure she was the focus of store security as they tried to figure out what this woman was going to do. It was relaxing for her to be alone. For me, it was like a treasure hunt. I would ask what she was looking for and go off on my own, eventually returning with items I thought may meet her approval. I knew that most of the time I would be taking things back to where I had found them, but every so often I would see a special look on her face. She would light up with approval. I was elated and that was my reward. I had found a treasure for my queen!

On Crystle's fifty-eighth birthday—yes, the exact day—she was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme. A terminal grade four brain tumour with a very grim diagnosis. Her diagnosis worsened when the surgeons informed us that they were unable to remove any of the tumour due to its location in her brain. I remember bursting into tears in the office of her family doctor as he read the results of the CT scan. When we arrived at the hospital that day, the hospital where Crystle had worked since we had moved to Niagara, she seemed calm. The director of her department brought down a single flower with a Happy Birthday greeting. Crystle was loved.

Less than eight months later she was gone. Taken away from friends and family. It was a gruelling time and an experience that I know many people have had to endure. The care Crystle received was full of compassion and for that I will be forever grateful. I don't believe I ever fully accepted the gravity of her diagnosis. Even while she was bedridden for the last two months of her life, I was still expecting a miracle. How could I not cling on to hope? I could not bear the thought of losing her. When she passed away, I was broken in two.

I suppose shock came over me initially. For those last two months we were provided a shift nurse to sit with Crystle through the night so our family could get proper sleep and rest. With the assistance of personal service workers, our family provided Crystle's care through the end of her life, at home. I know this is not possible in many cases. I felt privileged to have been able to keep her home, but I could not have done so without the assistance of our children and community care nurses who visited Crystle every day, no matter the weather. And there was some treacherous weather. Crystle was not expected to survive the two months she was at home and eventually our shift nurse was taken from us. We were taking turns being with Crystle through the night. It was difficult but drew us even closer together as we cared for our beloved wife and mother. Then our wonderful palliative nurse from CCAC negotiated with the health care administration to provide a shift nurse to come in and be with Crystle so our family could get some much-needed rest. I fell asleep quickly that first night the nurse had returned. I had been in bed less than thirty minutes when the nurse came calling. I did not hear her, but my son was roused and came into my room to wake me. When he told me that the nurse had been calling me, I had a strong sense of what had happened. This is not unique: most of us have heard similar stories of knowing when a loved one has passed. I had much the same experience when my father passed away a few years earlier.

Crystle had passed. The love of my life was gone.

It took a year to convince myself that I had something valuable to share. I was inspired when I read a book titled, *Just Stay*, the story of a couple's journey with his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. It is simply raw emotion of how they lived this period of their lives together, with family, and with their very special care team, until his passing. I have read many books over the past year and none spoke to me more profoundly than this book. It provided no specific advice, it simply shared their experience. In their words I found comfort. As I read their story, I was able to find pieces of their journey that helped me reconcile the decisions I had made for Crystle during her illness. It was hard to avoid judging myself and second-guessing the choices I had made. Their story didn't discuss the aftermath of grief, but it allowed me to forgive myself, and perhaps more importantly know that every decision I made was made out of pure love for Crystle.

My story is about grief. It is my personal experience as I worked through the pain I felt in losing Crystle. Grief is a harsh emotion that overcame me in ways I could never have imagined. I faced anger, jealousy, guilt, hopelessness and aloneness. I confess my mind even wandered into the realm of suicide. In the end, I determined life was very much worth living.

I am not a trained therapist, counsellor, or medical practitioner. My undergraduate degree is in business and I have been an IT professional for most of my career. I kept asking myself, "What can I offer people? What is different about my story?"

Experience is what I have to offer. The real-life experiences in *Just Stay* helped me, so maybe my story can help others, too. I have walked the dark path of grief and emerged into the daylight. The sun looks different now but there is sunshine and for that I am grateful. I don't think anyone ever completely recovers from loss of a loved one, but you can defeat the grief.

This book is not a guide through grief. There will be no *ten steps* to recovery. I do not intend to imply that books offering advice and specific steps to overcoming grief are not important. There are many books offering *solutions* to grief. I recommend anyone going through grief read at least one of these books. I have read many books over the past year relating to grief and each one has given me a small piece of my own personal puzzle. Each time I read a book, some piece would connect with me and slowly I began to get the upper hand on my own grief.

The grief group I attended after Crystle passed allowed me to meet fellow travellers on the road of grief. I was doing reasonably well, at least as I judged myself. About halfway through the eight-week session, one of the members of our group asked the facilitator a question: “When will it stop hurting?” The question pierced through me. If ever I experienced compassion it was at that moment. This member of our group had lost a spouse, too, about the same time as Crystle had passed. I had pondered the very same question myself. But my perspective was different. It was then I realized how unique the process of working through grief is for each of us. This member of our group was lost in grief and the question was framed in the hope that if a certain amount of time passed, the hurt, too, would pass. The truth is there is no time frame by which you should *feel better*. I have met others who tried to wait out grief, but grief seems to have infinite patience. It won’t simply go away unless we make it go away. My deepest hope in sharing my story is that some of what I write will be a help, in some small way, so that others can use a part of my path through grief to find their own unique way to healing.

1. Jennifer Fazakerley, Helen Butlin-Butler, and Grace Bradish, *Just Stay--: a couple’s last journey together*, (Toronto, 2012).