

SHAKING HANDS WITH DEATH

January 4 2016 was a just a typical day doing fiddly jobs on a smallholding, nothing special, the drains were blocked and needed sorting out. They didn't quite get finished as with all jobs there was a bit more for tomorrow. I could remember thinking, New Years Eve, my birthday, had just passed and what a way to start the year. We managed to grab an early night after a bath. Somewhere around twelve I woke up with back ache and needed to use the toilet - nothing new there except for having really bad indigestion so I took some Buscopan because I have a gallstone, but it didn't help. After 15-20 minutes it turned into a familiar pain I knew and at that point it was my heart as I had had problems in the past.

I remember rummaging for my GTN spray "a quick spray on the tongue and I will be OK". No, not this time, instead I started to break out in a sweat, I made my way from the bathroom to the bedroom and woke my wife with sweat dripping off my nose. I told her that I was having trouble with my heart again and asked her to stay with me. She got out of bed taking the phone and we both made our way back into the bathroom. My wife suggested an ambulance but I refused saying it will pass in a minute. It didn't so we made our way downstairs quietly so as not to wake the children and my wife rang for an ambulance. I asked her to open the windows for air as I was struggling to breathe and i felt as if someone was sitting on my chest and at the same time someone had belted my elbows with a sledge hammer. My wife duly opened the gates and doors, put the dog in another room, all whilst talking to the operator and relaying questions and answers between myself and the operator. With the pain I was in and the weakness I was feeling I just wanted them to shut up.

Not many minutes passed when a tall authoritative man arrived called Mark our local first responder. He asked me more flipping questions, took my pulse/blood pressure and then generally chatted to keep us calm. I felt reassured but anxious at the same time. In what seemed ages but in actual fact no time at all the ambulance crew turned up 3 in total, Brett who seemed to be the lead. More people asking me questions and discussing things between themselves. My wife was asked to close the windows and why they were open. Mark asked the young rookie paramedic if she was ex-services and he established that he was himself the same. With that exchange there was an exchange of looks and I was on my way out of the house (I had to apologise for the discarded heap of wellies the children had created) on past the rods, mini-digger and shovel from earlier to a much tidier ambulance. The female paramedic asked my wife if she was coming but she declined having 4 sleeping children in bed. This is where my life was about to change forever. I faced outwards on the ambulance ramp looking at my wife stood there in her nightshirt and slippers fearing that I wouldn't see her or the children again. I looked at her and tried to say "I'm alright - I'll see you soon".

The doors shut on the ambulance like the noise of a car bonnet being closed. The clinical smell and warmth were quite overwhelming to me. As I lay being wired-up prodded and asked more questions in the back of the NHS ice cream wagon I was trying to make humour as I could see the worry on the face of the young girl. I can remember them trying to find good veins to put in a Canula and asking me if I normally had difficult veins. I answered them "difficult everything". Them needing to get the ECG pads on me they were having difficulties because of my dressing gown, asking me if I could get my arm out or whether

they should cut it. As they were struggling to cut it I thought that my 4-year old son could do it quicker.

That was the point I shook hands with death.

I stopped seeing what was happening in the back of the ambulance and found myself in very open, pain free place. I did not feel cold, I just felt totally safe and calm. Without doubt there was a weightless feeling and a salmon coloured glow around me. I was aware that there were people around me talking but not asking me questions but almost going about their own business and yet at the same time I felt part of it in an unobtrusive way. I was so contented like no other contentment that I had felt before. It was timeless. In my mind I cannot join that point and the one where I felt bungee jumped upwards through hedges on the left of me, through buildings, people and a whole variation of memories and then my eyes were open back in the NHS ambulance to see the young rookie paramedic in front of me and Brett to my right. Now I was feeling pain.

The crew were in conversation and I heard Brett say that they had shocked me and I asked him calmly "did you say you just shocked me?" and he said "yes we have done it twice" and I felt the adrenaline cut in and knew it was serious. I looked towards my feet at the rookie whose eyes of fear I will never forget and reassured her by saying "Don't worry, it is all going to be OK" as if to relieve both our worries. I looked at the ambulance roof and clearly decided in my own head that I had to stay awake and one by one brought up pictures in my eyes of my family and physically drew frames around them listening to the drone of the gearbox and squeaks of the fittings in the vehicle. Then we arrived at Musgrove hospital.

The doors opened and I felt cold rain on me as I left the ambulance and what felt like directly into the lifts to be asked another round of questions "Do you give consent? You are having a heart attack and are going to die". At the same time a nurse was trying to remove my boxer shorts and put on paper ones at which point I said "I can do that myself - please leave me some of my dignity" at that point I realised I had wet myself. I asked if I had wet myself and Brett replied "Don't worry about it mate - it's because we shocked you". I wasn't worried about doing it just rather the fact that I couldn't remember.

They then performed the most amazing procedure I have ever seen threading wires up my right arm through my veins and into my heart showing me everything on a big screen inserting stents and before my eyes my blood started to flow again. All the time this was going on again I was aware that Brett and his crew were watching through the observation windows. AS we exchanged looks we both put our thumbs up to one another in sheer happiness. I passed the crew once more when I told them to "Look after the freshman" and that was the last I saw of them.

Seven months have passed now and I have made some vast changes to the way I deal with stress in life to the point that we have set aside land for a green hideaway campsite to offer others the chance to de-stress or learn new skills and help their communities. As one of my pay-backs I have promised to raise money towards South Petherton's defibrillators as they not only save a life but also that of the whole family.

From the bottom of our hearts we would truly like to thank all those involved - you will never be forgotten.