

This tale begins with an inappropriate flash of humour, inappropriate and dark humour. Follows is the story of when I lost my dad. Were he able to comment on his own passing, being referred to in this genteel way, he most certainly would have said, "Well, that was careless of you."

And so it was that my father was dying. Cancer had made a return visit, with a vengeance.

After our yearly summer visit, that year, this year of saying my final farewell, when I realized how much weight my dad had lost, how laboured his breathing was at times, and heard the dreadful rattle in his too-frequent cough, I decided I'd best not wait another year to visit, and planned to come back for the Thanksgiving weekend in October.

My flight was booked for early Saturday morning. On the Monday before, Dad called to confirm what time I was coming. He sounded.... like Dad. Thursday evening, he phoned my big brother, just to chat, and mentioned that I was coming in two days time. The very next day, Friday afternoon, the day before I was to arrive for the weekend, I got a call from my step-mother. "Lisa...are you still coming?.... your dad is dying". An ambulance had been called for him earlier that afternoon, but as he had a DNR order, and he was brought home to his own bed.

I later regretted not changing my travel plans and immediately getting the car and driving with my brother but the difference between driving all night and flying the

next morning was only a matter of hours, and I thought would make little difference. In a way, I was right.

And then, during the restless night, a computer malfunction mistakenly cancelled every flight that airline was scheduled to make that day. It meant that not only did passenger flights get cancelled, so too did incoming crew flights, and all across the country, people were stranded. I found an alternate flight from Victoria to Vancouver, and I saw the plane I was supposed to take to Penticton, saw my distinctive zebra-striped suitcase loaded on... phoned my brother to say it looked like I was just going to get out.... and then all the suitcases, zebra included, came off, one by one and two by two. And then the announcements started. Apologies for inconvenience. Passengers wishing to connect to Greyhound bus lines. Passengers needing a meal voucher. Passengers who had given up all hope, head to the courtesy desk.

Here I could have, again, made different choices, I could have rented a car at the airport and driven the 5 hours. I could have taken the bus. But all I could think was that a plane was the fastest way, and I had to get there. So, I headed to the courtesy desk. This is where almost unbelievable coincidences and beautiful stories start to unfold.

Being unfamiliar with Vancouver Airport, instead of heading to the "Send us your tired, your poor and huddled masses" desk, I ended up at the "I've misplaced my sable-lined toilet seat warmer" First-Class passengers-only desk. But all I knew was I needed help, and there was no line, and the two smiling ladies asked me what I needed. I blurted out "My flight to Penticton was cancelled and my dad is dying and I have to get there and I don't know what to do." And my previously-

held-in-check emotions burst forth. "Oh how awful" said one of the kind ladies, and before she'd even finished her short sentence, the other one had me bundled me into a golf cart after a quick phone call, to get me on the next flight to the next closest city, Kelowna. The First Class Counter lady was my first gift.

Down in the departure terminal again, I received my next gifts. I wasn't convinced I would get on the Kelowna flight, so I phoned and bought a ticket on another flight with another airline flying just a little later. I didn't tell the second airline my story, but as I fumbled about for a pen to write down the confirmation number, a stranger sitting a couple of chairs away handed me hers. She was my second gift. I completed my call, returned her pen, and thanked her for her kindness. I explained why I so desperately was trying to get where I was going. She said "Well, don't worry. If they can't get you on this flight, I'll tell them to give you my seat." She had been sitting chatting to two young nurses, and as they couldn't help but overhear my story, one young woman asked where my dad had been hospitalized earlier that autumn. I told her, and it turned out that she not only had done shifts in that hospital, in that very ward, she knew the head nurse who had been in charge of Dad's care, to whom I had spoken on the phone not a month earlier. The young nurse told me that my Dad would have received the best of care from that senior nurse. She was my third gift that day.

My fourth gift was a little harder to recognize. And in this I am reminded of what I love about irony, and the universe. I was asked to come to the check-in desk. In line ahead of me was a very polished, high-heeled, well-coiffed, very agitated young woman. I could see she was also anxious about getting on this flight, and so we chatted briefly. It turns out that she grew up in Kelowna, and had moved to Vancouver some months earlier. When she arrived at the airport that morning

to discover her flight was cancelled, she burst into tears, afraid she might not make it home until the next day, ruining her Thanksgiving weekend. Now, I'm not going to lie, uncharitable thoughts did cross my mind, but as it happened we all made it on to the flight, and I was seated next to the young woman.

The flight is less than an hour, and the time was spent mostly in silence, though I did tell my seatmate why I was traveling, and she told me that she was going to write a strongly worded letter to the airline on her legal company's letterhead when she got back to the Law office on Tuesday.

Eventually, I pulled into my Dad's driveway by 2:30pm. My original plan would have had me there by 10:00am. My brother, who had elected to drive through the night had arrived in the wee hours. He told me later that when they first arrived, they thought dad knew they were there, that they felt a slight pressure from his hand, a change of expression on his face. Those were their gifts. When I finally walked in the door, I didn't know what awaited me. "You made it!" was the first thing I heard and I was gathered into the house and straight through to Dad's room. He was still alive.

I would then receive the most valuable, most important gift that day. One I cherish as a privilege and an honour to have been given.

Later, I calculated that I had been at Dad's side for two hours, and moments after the room emptied of all other visitors, Dad gave two quick gasps of breath, and then there were no more.

The remainder of the weekend we spent together, in reminiscence and grieving, remembering and celebrating.

As I was about to board my return flight on Monday, I noticed the last passenger hurrying through security. It was the young, high-heeled lawyer, happy and replete with her weekend amongst her family. She saw me, and made a beeline for me, and as she asked me if I made it in time, had I gotten to my dad, I realized the meaning of her role in this story-- I was her gift. I was an example to her of what to value. Not to be absorbed in the irritation of being late to Thanksgiving dinner but realizing what a difference 2 hours can make.

In this tale of happenstance and coincidence, it unfolds that some months later, as I passed through Vancouver airport again, I saw the Courtesy desk lady, the one who bundled me into her golf cart and ensured I made it onto the flight. I was able to thank her for her kindness that day. Turns out, she had an almost identical story about getting to her dad in similar circumstances and being grateful for the assistance from strangers.

And so despite my grieving and my loss, I understood and shared in her gratitude, thankful to have completed that journey in this way.