Each year is filled with anniversaries.

The day my dad stopped eating.

The first time someone said the word cancer.

The day Dad entered hospice.

The night I wanted to die.
#1 – The day my dad stopped eating

Dad began coughing at my eighth birthday party. He soon got worst. He stopped eating, even when Mom fixed his favorites.

One night, he ignored Mom’s tuna noodle casserole, one of his favorites. He didn’t even take a single bite of the butterscotch pudding she made.

“More for me,” I yelled, when he waved the pudding away. I happily shoveled the extra desert down my throat quickly, before he could change his mind.

“Are you all right?” Mom asked Dad.

“I’m fine,” Dad said but coughed again. His summer cold was not letting go, even though it was September and I was back in school, in third grade. A week later, he went running to the bathroom after eating a few bites, even when it was only chicken soup.

“Enough,” Mom said. “You’re going to see a doctor.”

She was the boss about things like that. But Dad still surprised me when he did not argue.
#2 - The first time someone said the word cancer.
C. A. N. C. E. R. That’s what the doctors said.

I hadn’t even heard the word pancreas before.

I lifted my shirt and stared at my bellybutton in the bathroom mirror. The doctor said my pancreas was a funny shaped gland behind my stomach. He told us that when cancer grows there you get so sick you can barely walk or talk.

Doctors kept Dad in the hospital and began treatment right away, with medicines that made him even sicker. He came home after two days, grumpy. He looked smaller, but that was impossible, people couldn’t get smaller in only two days. He didn’t laugh, or move too fast, and he still didn’t eat much. He took medicine every day. Within weeks, he lost the thick black hair from the top of his head. His eyebrows, and even the forest of hair on his arms fell out.

The cancer didn’t care. It was a monster determined to destroy my father.

Dad’s skin color changed, going from dark sepia to desert sand. He couldn’t work and had to go back into the hospital. He got fired. His boss sent a ton of flowers afterward.
#3 - The day Dad entered hospice

Dad brought those flowers home with him from the hospital today. This time, he really did look smaller. Like a sack of brown skin with bones inside that rattle as they settle toward the bottom.

“At least I can sleep now,” he said after we helped him to bed. “No more waking me up for my blood or some treatment. And we don’t have to worrying about when visiting hours end.”

Just when his life would end.

The doctors sent him home to enter hospice care. That means they gave up and he’s going to die. Soon.

“I want to kill cancer,” I said.

My older brother Lamont glared at me, as if I’d stolen his idea. He threw the flowers across the hall after we left Dad’s bedroom. “What’s the point of working hard if people dump you when you need them? Our father worked hard all his life. Now he’ll die, alone.”

I picked up the last book Dad read to me, *Sinbad the Persian pirate*. We had story time every night until Dad went into the hospital. I remembered how Lamont liked to pretend he wasn’t listening, but he leaned closer every time poor Sinbad was in
danger.

“There should be more stories like this,” I said, meaning, I wish Dad could read to me again.

Lamont didn’t understand and said, “There are a thousand more.”

“Why so many?”

“Because once a bad king married a different girl every day and killed her on their wedding night.” He pretended to stab an invisible figure. “One night, the new wife told him a bedtime story without the ending. He had to keep her alive to hear that the next day. Then she started a new story. She kept going for a thousand days.”

“What happened when she ran out of stories?” I asked, scared for the girl.

“By then the king decided to keep her around.” Lamont shrugged. “I guess they all lived happily ever after.”

“All lived,” I repeat as the most brilliant idea ever sprang in my head. “How long is a thousand days?”

“Figure it out. You need to practice long division anyway.”

Seriously, Bro? Sometimes Lamont tried to act like a grown-up, but he’s only in eighth grade.

“You could use your phone,” I said.

“Yeah, I could.”

I groan, but begin working the problem. The answer comes to
more than two and a half years.

Not forever, but it’s a start.

The lights were dim in Dad’s bedroom. His eyes opened when I told him a story of how McCool, my class hamster, escaped his cage. “Carmela wouldn’t stop giggling,” I said. “Even though the escape was her fault.”

“Then what happened?” Dad tried to smile. “How did you find McCool?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” I promised.

“Deal.” He patted my hand with a touch so soft I barely felt it.

When I returned to our bedroom, I told Lamont, “I’ll need a new story for tomorrow night.” And the next, and the next. This was going to work.
#4 - The night I wanted to die

“Your father died peacefully in his sleep,” Mom told us the next morning. She blinked puffy eyes. “Remember, you will always have him in your heart.”

“I don’t want him in my heart,” I yelled. “I want him here. With me.” She should have woken me. Why didn’t she want me there?

I crawled into my parents’ closet, closed the door and sat alone in the dark. Dad’s scent was all over his clothing. I should have told Dad how the story ended. That I sat on the floor holding a piece of celery until McCool crawled out from beneath the cabinet and came to me. I held him safe, his tiny heart beating in my hands.

My dad’s heart would never beat again.

People you love shouldn’t die. Why did God let that happen?

The closet door opened. Through my tears, I saw my brother enter. He closed the door and sat beside me in the dark.

“They should have kept fighting,” he whispered. “Mom shouldn’t have let him give up.”

“I’m scared I’ll lose you too,” I admitted. If I lost my brother, I’d be all alone.
“I’m not going anywhere.” He hugged me tight. I clung to my brother, twisting my fingers in his jacket. When I closed my eyes, it was almost like Dad was still with me.

This “T-Story” is a prequel to the events in COURAGE a middle grade novel by Barbara Binns. In the pages of Courage, you will find out what happens to T-Shawn (T to his friends) and his brother Lamont in the years following the loss of their father. Nothing is simple for either boy, and they discover that love alone is not enough to help them face the world. They also need COURAGE.

Courage is available at

- Amazon: [https://amzn.to/2OBxhA8](https://amzn.to/2OBxhA8)