



# Susan Bookbinder

## My 'best day' became one I'd never forget

It was my 30th birthday. I was celebrating it at Bookbinder's nightclub in Piccadilly with friends and family coming from all over the world to join us.

As north of England correspondent for the newly-launched GMTV, I was in my dream job, covering national stories, but based in the Bookbinder family's English capital, Manchester.

My boyfriend and I had decided to announce our engagement. It was, on paper, to be the best day of my life. It turned out to be the day that life would never be the same again.

I knew something was wrong when my dad turned up at Bookbinder's with my uncle Arthur, but without mum and my aunt Margaret.

Typically, mum hadn't wanted to spoil my night by being ill, so had told dad to say she had a migraine and was staying in with Margaret. She sent me her gold ruby bracelet as a birthday present, which I treasure.

The next morning, I was called out early to cover the breaking news of the abduction of a two-year-old boy in Liverpool.

The horrific story that unfolded was that of the brutal murder of James Bulger. The hideous truth that was to emerge will forever be engraved in my memory, not least because it reminds me of the day my own world changed forever.

While I was out reporting in Bootle, mum was taken into Wythenshawe Hospital. In those days, they still had consultants available on a Sunday and she had been told in no uncertain terms, that she was going to die. She had only a few months left.

I had got used to mum being brave, surviving radiotherapy, chemo, a lumpectomy, a mastecto-



**MEMORIES:** Susan's 'selfie' and, right, with parents David and Mary and brother John



people to park their cars — a hospital practise to which we have become accustomed over the last two decades.

The look on my mum's beautiful face — and my dad's — when I walked into the ward is one that still haunts me.

It was the first time that I had seen her without hope. Her peaches and cream skin was drained to white and her brown eyes full of fear.

It was the moment I had dreaded for eight years, since dad took me for a walk around the lake near our family home. Something we always did when I came home, something we had done as a family all our lives, but it was when dad took us alone, without mum, that my brother John and I knew, there was some bad news about her health.

Mum was just 48 when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer. I remember dad telling me on the walk around the lake. Squeezing my hand and telling me to be strong for mum and that we would all fight it together.

I remember the very moment the thought of losing her came piercingly into my mind and I recall dismissing it as impossible within that second.

That was not going to happen to mum, not my mum, she was invincible.

Suddenly, in the clinical white light of Ward 6 at Wythenshawe Hospital, it was not just possible, it was a certainty.

I gave up my job to be with my mother in what were to be her last months.

It is a decision I have never regretted for a single minute and one which gave me a great insight into the lovelessness of some people in my business, who value the narcissism of television more than the life of their mother.

There is nothing good to write about my mother's suffering — except that at least she did not have to see her son, my brother John, suffer and die from cancer so horribly aged 37, 13 years later.

She showed us all how it is done. How to take it, to suffer and die with dignity.

The sense of hopelessness I felt when watching my mother die in terrible pain has never left me and is particularly poignant around this time of year just after Mothering Sunday.

Twenty years ago, no one talked about cancer, if you did, you called

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it 'the big C'. There was an unwritten pact between women with breast cancer in particular. It is something which attacks the very fibre of femininity.

Things have changed. Cancer is no longer a taboo and there are 'survivors' rather than 'sufferers', thanks to campaigns which have harnessed the bravery of stars such as Angelina Jolie and Kylie Minogue.

I regularly give to breast cancer charities and am actively involved with Prostate Cancer UK, which has celebrated the success of breast cancer campaigning and research and the increasing survival rates.

So I was delighted to see the power of the no-make-up-selfie, which swept social media, raising £2 million in just two weeks for breast cancer research.

I was supported by our cat Kofi,

in posting mine and was terribly flattered by the huge response on my Facebook page.

Many people said lovely things, not only about me not needing make up, but more importantly, about how proud my mother would have been.

Losing my mum and my aunt Clarice to breast cancer was not enough to qualify me for genetic testing, but my Jewish blood was.

The doctors are quite focused on the matter of Jewish genealogy and told me that I am more at risk of carrying the BRCA gene because of this background.

I am relieved to say that I have had the test and am not in fact a carrier.

It's been 20 years since we lost mum, who was just 56. Hardly a day goes by when I don't think of her. There is plenty to regret. She didn't live to see me work at Sky, Channel Four News, ITV News and BBC Radio Five Live.

She didn't see me buy my first house and, most of all, she never met her grandson Zac, who has brought us all so much joy.

More than this, my biggest regret is that I didn't tell her how much I loved her. All the things I would miss about her. Her smile and reassurance, no matter what. Her ideas and inspiration.

She was the one who believed in us. She was the one who gave me ideas for stories — such as the hospital cleaning — and my dad for political campaigns, such as banning the cane in schools, free school meals and supporting Nelson Mandela and the Birmingham Six.

Mum was a librarian and loved working in the local library. But she had to put up with people coming to attack her because they had read some rubbish in the local newspaper.

By way of illustration, one editorial encouraged people to throw rubbish into our garden so that we would know how it would feel to live near gypsies.

Then there was the *Sunday Times*, which libelled my father in worldwide banner headlines. She didn't live to see her family exonerated after winning the longest running and costliest libel action in English legal history.

The *Sunday Times'* unreserved apology will remain a secret to her.

Despite this goldfish bowl existence she did not choose, an attempt on my father's life, vile abuse and blatant antisemitism, my mum was an intellectual who devoured books and did the hard crossword every day in the *Guardian*.

She was a woman of ideas and a home-maker who loved freesias and had a penchant for sweet peas. She was a great cook and made the best Lancashire hot pot in the world. Mum made beautiful bagels and amazing paella.

Why couldn't I tell her all this before she died? It felt that it was more about me than her and that she may feel as though I was only

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telling her because she was dying. That, in itself, was something I could not accept.

One night, near the end, mum was trying to teach my dad to make an omelette, so that he could look after himself when she had gone, but had retired exhausted to her bed.

I decided right then to tell her all this and that I owed her everything.

I could not get the words out because I thought she would think she was considered a write off. I broke down and left the room before she could see my wailing despair.

Her response was to tell my dad how worried she was about me and how I was going to cope without her.

It took me 19 years to even face these facts. My mother had always encouraged me to write and it was only through my writing that I have been able to express all this, including in a poem I wrote last year.

So those of you who still have mothers — make a donation to breast cancer research.

Most of all, tell your mother how much you love her, not just on Mothering Sunday, but all through the year.

Don't leave it too late, like me.

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### It was moment I had dreaded for eight years

my, infections and gangrene from a filthy hospital.

Through it all, she would constantly turn the focus back to us, selflessly suffering, not wanting her pain to get in the way of our careers.

She even turned the dirty conditions at Christie's into a story idea for me when I was a researcher at LWT and I went undercover as a hospital cleaner to expose the death of a patient in a dirty hospital.

It was the time when the Conservative government was privatising cleaning services. The cheapest contractor had won the bidding in the case of the story I was researching.

The programme I produced revealed a cover-up of the death of a 72-year-old woman who had fallen and grazed her arm on a dirty floor.

The control of infection report showed that she had contracted a streptococcal infection and died three days later, but her death certificate said she had died of pneumonia.

My head was full of poor little Jamie Bulger and his terrified family when I arrived at Wythenshawe and made my way to the ward, thinking how shocking it was that they actually charged