By Heather McPherson, twelve

I remember my dad so well: the way he laughed, the way he smiled, the corny jokes he used to tell and that goofy look he put on his face to cheer me up.  When I was growing up, my dad was in the Navy, first sailing, and then later working in the office.  I remember how his office was covered in cards that I had made him.

After my father retired from the Navy, I got to know him much better.  We did more things together, we talked more often and he'd always, always listen to everything I had to say.  I never guessed that those good times would come to such an abrupt end.

On April 21, my dad sat down with me and told me something that changed my life forever.  He had terminal lung cancer.  When he told me, I felt hot and cold all over at the same time.  I couldn't move.  I couldn't breathe.  I couldn't make a sound.  I just sat there, and we both began to cry.

Months went by with regular hospital visits, chemotherapy and radiation.  My father looked better, but then started to get worse with each passing day.  I watched him, that strong, amazing, fearless man that I once knew, become weak, sick and tired.  As the weeks went on, he could no longer eat, and he was worse than ever before.  My mother had planned to bring him home to visit, but as December came, he became too sick to come home.

December 11 came.- My birthday.  We brought a cake to his room and he tried to sing happy birthday for me, then he called me over to his bed and kissed my forehead.  I tried to believe that everything would be all right.  That everything would go back to normal.

Two days later, I spent the night with my dad.  I sat by his bed and watched him sleep, and he looked so peaceful.  It was really hard for me to see him the way he was though, with IVs in his hands, and tubes all over.  I cried myself to sleep every night after that.

On the night of December 20, I spent the night at my mum's friend's house.  I lay awake that night, thinking about the next morning and, for some reason, fearing it.  Maybe I knew or maybe I had a sense that something was going to happen.  The next morning, she took me to the hospital and my mum was there.  I sat down on a chair in the lounge, and I overheard my mother talking to her friend.

"The nurses say that today is the day."  I felt exactly like I had eight months ago, a surge of hot and cold filling my body.  My grandparents were at the hospital too; my tiny grandmother was shaking, and my grandfather was talking to a nurse.  I didn't cry, though.  There were other patients in the room, and I didn't want to upset them.

I went to see my dad.  He looked so sick, so thin, but I held back my tears.  I didn't want him to see me crying.  I walked over to his bed and I bent down and hugged him.  He whispered into my ear, "I love you," and kissed my forehead.  I hugged my dad, kissed his cheek and whispered, "I love you, too, Daddy."

I stayed with him in that room until the nurses told me that I should get something to eat.  My two sisters, my brother and my sister's boyfriend were waiting for me, so that we could all go out to lunch together.  We went across the road, and we were halfway through our lunch when my sister's cell phone rang.  I dreaded this phone call.  My sister, in tears, mumbled something to the caller and hung up.  "It's time."

We quickly paid the check and ran across the street.  There were cars coming, but we didn't care.  We wanted to see our father.  When we got there, my grandma was standing in the hall crying.  She told us that he was gone.  It was too late.  My sister collapsed on the floor and couldn't get back up.  I ran into my dad's room and saw his lifeless body, just lying there, motionless.  My mum was beside him, holding his hand and crying.  I didn't know what to do; I was so confused.  I just started crying and ran up to him. I hugged him and said, "Daddy, come back, come back," but he didn't.

We had a service for him on December 27.  My mum had put an announcement in the paper about his death, giving details about the service.  There were so many people there.  Most of them didn't talk; they just sat there and cried.  My godfather and my aunt both gave speeches, and both burst into tears when they finished.

To this day, almost six months after my father's death, I think about all those people crying for one man, for my father.  I think a lot about different things.  I think about how he isn't suffering anymore and how he is up in heaven with his grandparents smiling down at me.  I think about how he won't be there for my graduation, and how he won't be able to walk me down the aisle at my wedding, but I also think about how he'll always be here for me - not in body, but in spirit - and how he'll forever be in my heart.

If I could say one thing to him right now, and he would be able to hear it, it would be this . . . Daddy, don't forget to wait for me.