

Scattering Ashes *by Peter Brooks*

IT is an experience that almost everyone will have to cope with, sooner or later: the death of a close relative.

In my case it happened to me when my father, just two days after his 65th birthday, suffered a severe angina attack and an hour later died while under the care of his doctor. It was there when it happened.

The event was sudden and unexpected — as these things always are — and the rest of the family was, like me, totally unprepared.

Like all emotionally charged events, the circumstances surrounding such a sudden loss become etched in one's mind. Ten years later and I can still remember most of it as if it happened yesterday.

I don't think I have ever been so scared, either before or since.

I can remember Mum and I holding each other, sobbing, the tears falling hot and fast — then as now — as we tried to come to terms with the stark reality of what had happened. It had all come to pass so quickly. One minute he had a bout of severe chest pains, something he'd had before without incident, the next he was taken from us forever. It was too much to absorb in a short space of time.

The family gathered together and visited Dad in the funeral home's chapel of rest so that everyone could say their farewells.

The undertakers had prepared his body using techniques that apparently dated back to Victorian times: his fingernails had been filed to points and his head was placed at such an odd angle, as if he was bowing while lying on his back. It was disconcerting.

One of us — I forget who exactly — took hold of one of his hands and in turn we each held it for a few minutes. When the elder of my two young sisters took her turn, she suddenly exclaimed "His hand is warm!" as if perhaps he had been playing some prank all this time and was in fact alive. Human tissue responds very quickly to heat even in death and our own hands had warmed his. That was even more disconcerting.

I remember very little of the brief church service or the briefer session at the crematorium. No one had anything to say — we were all too distraught — and I could barely even sing, let alone stand up and speak about my father, without the risk of breaking down in tears.

None of his former colleagues from Thames Valley Police attended, despite promises that a bus had been hired to bring them all. That was sad. The only other people to say farewell to him, aside from his immediate family, were two neighbours. That was even sadder.

It took several days for the remains to be made available by the crematorium. In the meantime the rest of the family arranged for a final

gathering for the scattering of the ashes.

We weren't entirely certain where to scatter them. The consensus was that since my father had apparently enjoyed his time with the Royal Navy and had also enjoyed taking a turn along the harbour wall in Ramsgate, we should scatter his ashes at sea.

That proved to be too expensive, and anyway, we didn't want our grief to be compounded with seasickness.

The next thought was to scatter his ashes into the sea from the harbour wall, but it turned out that that too cost a considerable amount, and we would have had to apply for a special license to do so.

In the end we decided to be slightly criminal — ironic considering my father's former profession as a Police Officer — and scatter the ashes from the harbour wall without permission. After all, who would it hurt?

So we gathered together at dusk and drove down to the harbour. Our younger sister had found pictures of a Spitfire fighter and a Lancaster bomber (my father had flown in Lancs during the war) and we figured we'd cast them into the water as well — just a little gesture that seemed a nice thing to do, a bit like burying the pharaoh with his badges of office.

We must have looked most suspicious, lurking in such a group, furtively glancing around and

shuffling along the wall until we found a part that actually had some sea beside it — true to form, the tide was out.

We waited until there was no one nearby and then we opened the urn and pulled out the polythene bag containing the ashes. We began to shake the contents over the wall as my sister tried to throw the two paper airplanes after them.

But sea breezes are a fact of life on such structures, and one blew up just as we began the task of scattering Dad at sea. It threw the paper planes back at us and took a sizeable amount of Dad and scattered him over us — mostly over me.

We picked up the paper planes and resumed trying to throw them and the remainder of Dad's ashes over the harbour wall and into the sea, while still keeping a wary eye out for passers by and official looking people in peaked caps.

The onshore wind insisted on blowing everything back at us, but we persisted until finally we were successful.

I couldn't help laughing. It didn't feel as though Dad was resisting so much as Nature demonstrating that even in death it, after all, always has the last word.