

# The One Left Behind

## A Personal Essay

By Michele Alishahi

Three years ago, my husband died of a brain tumor. He passed away peacefully in his sleep, at home, surrounded by those who loved him dearly.

Jim drew his last breath very early on a Thursday, at around 12:30 a.m.

He waited until I kissed him goodnight. I whispered in his ear that I was going to lie down on the couch and get some rest. But I would be nearby, if he needed me. My last words to him were “I love you.” Jim groaned softly in his unconscious state. It was almost inaudible. I knew, though, that he had heard me.

Twenty minutes later, Jim’s older brother, who had been sitting with him, cried out in shock. I was half asleep when I heard him say in a shaky voice, “I’m not sure what just happened. I think Jim’s dead.”

After being in a deep sleep since the previous Sunday, Jim had suddenly opened his big blue eyes, exhaled with a moan, and then closed his eyes again, for the last time.

My love, my best friend, the man I had shared the last twelve years of my life with, was gone.

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Jim’s death marked the end of a long journey that began over eight years earlier when he was first diagnosed with a grade III anaplastic astrocytoma. In layman’s terms: a primary malignant brain tumor. At the time, I was 25 and Jim was 27; we had been together for four years.

A terminal illness was the furthest thing from my mind during the early years of our relationship. Like most people in their twenties, Jim and I took our good health for granted. We assumed we had our whole lives ahead of us. Our plan was to marry when I finished graduate school.

Then the cancer came and it changed everything. It was no longer Jim and me. Now it was Jim, me, and the brain tumor. We were a threesome. I did not care, though. What mattered was that the person I loved was alive, here with me. All I wanted was for us to share a life together, even if it meant with a brain tumor. And that’s what we did. Jim and I married; I completed my degree; and we settled down into as normal a life as possible when living with cancer. Jim underwent two brain surgeries, radiation and numerous chemotherapy treatments, and experienced many physical and mental side effects. Some were irreversible.

Then a miracle happened. Nearly three years after his original diagnosis, Jim went into remission. For years, I looked forward to the day when he and I would celebrate the five-year anniversary of him being cancer-free. Secretly, I had held on to the number, hoping Jim would make it. He didn’t. The remission lasted for four years and three months.

The reality of that fifth year, following remission, was quite different from what I had hoped it would be. In early February, an MRI revealed that the brain tumor had returned, more aggressive than before. It was a grade IV, glioblastoma, or GBM for short, the most common type of cancerous adult brain tumors.

Later that month, Jim had his third brain surgery in seven years. The operation was a success; the neuro-surgeon removed 99 percent of the tumor mass. Unfortunately, microscopic cancer cells remained, and within weeks, they grew larger.

In mid-April, Jim had recovered enough from the surgery to begin chemotherapy. For the next twelve months, the neuro-oncologist prescribed one drug after another. Some worked for awhile, keeping the tumor stable for a month or two. Others did not work at all. The GBM was unstoppable. The doctors' efforts extended Jim's life for fifteen months, but they couldn't make the cancer go away.

Finally, they ran out of options. All that was left to do was to keep Jim as comfortable as possible for the last weeks of his life.

When we first got the news that the cancer had come back, I was determined that Jim would beat it. I told him, "You did it once. There's no reason why you can't do it again. We're going to get you back into remission, hon." Jim readily agreed, although I sensed that he didn't share my fervor.

We had been on this cancer-fighting journey together for years; yet we came at it from different perspectives.

Jim was the one *with* the cancer. It was his body that experienced the debilitating effects of the brain tumor and the treatments. Not mine.

Jim was the one who had to face his own mortality, again and again. Not me.

I was Jim's partner throughout this journey. I was beside him every step of the way. My job was to *help* Jim. Help him fight the cancer, help him live with the cancer, and, in the end, help him die.

I was the spouse, the one who loved and who shared my life with a person who had cancer. I was not the one who had to face the reality of my own death. I was the one who would lose my life partner to cancer; the one who would be left behind.

For years, even when Jim was in remission, my biggest fear was that the cancer would eventually win and take him away. It was that fear that drove me to do whatever was necessary to help him beat the brain tumor.

By November, I began to face the painful reality that Jim was dying. We would not have the happy ending I so desperately wanted. The brain tumor was too powerful, and in the end, it would win.

Coming to terms with this reality was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I fought it for the longest time. I did not want to give up on Jim, and I did not want him to think I had given up on him. I wanted him to fight the cancer with every ounce of strength he had for as long as he could.

But was I asking too much of him?

The effects Jim experienced in the last fifteen months of his life were far worse than what he had endured before. His body was not as strong as it once was; it took a beating. Jim had a drug overdose and was rushed to the hospital; painful sores developed on his legs; he couldn't control his bowel movements; he was unsteady on his feet because of muscle weakness on his right side; he had difficulty getting his words out; and his cognitive abilities slowly declined.

In the last weeks of his life, Jim hardly had any control over his own body. He couldn't stand, nor could he sit upright. Someone had to feed him and help him go to the bathroom, until the hospice nurse inserted a catheter. Jim was practically immobile. He had some movement in his left hand, and he could talk, a little. That was it.

It was hard watching the person I love suffer. It tore my heart out to see Jim in excruciating pain and to witness the deterioration of his mind and body. I felt helpless. There was nothing I could do to stop what was happening.

It was time to let go of the fight against the brain tumor. Jim's body was shutting down. My main priority was to love him, comfort him, and be there with him until the end.

For weeks, Jim and I lived in a limbo world, somewhere between life and death. It was no way for Jim to live. Death seemed like a better alternative.

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The funeral home director and his assistant laid Jim's limp body gently in the van. It was 2:30 in the morning when they pulled out of the driveway, taking Jim with them.

I stood outside, alone, in the dark, watching the van, until it was out of sight. The rest of the family was in the house. They could not bear to see Jim leave like that.

For a moment, I stood there. I was not ready to go back into the home that I had shared with Jim. No matter how many people were in there, it would feel empty without him.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the stars. I felt a profound sadness, knowing that Jim was gone forever. I was also relieved. My worst nightmare had come true, and I was grateful that it was over — for Jim’s sake, and mine. He was finally at peace.

The brain tumor had won; it took Jim away from me. But, it was never able to touch the love that we had shared. That belonged to Jim and me — only.

I whispered to Jim, “I’ll always love you, hon. You’re in my heart. Always.”

Then I turned and walked into the house.

The End

## **About the Author:**

Michele Alishahi is an American writer, living in one of Germany's beautiful wine-making regions. She writes personal essays about life and about writing. You can read more of Michele's essays at [writingalife.net](http://writingalife.net).

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All the best, from my heart to yours.

Michele Alishahi