



My only hope was to PRAY for a MIRACLE

A year ago, Joyce Herdson and her family were preparing for their last celebration together. She never imagined her prayers would be answered, and that the Christmas present of her life was on its way...

This time last year, it seemed that the only thing that could save me was a Christmas miracle. As my family and I sat around the dinner table wearing our paper hats and laughing at the terrible jokes in our crackers, I knew that's what we were all praying for. But it wasn't to be.

As I went to bed that night, I thought about how much my life had changed. The old me would be busy from the moment I woke up until bedtime, my days filled with five-mile walks with my husband, Colin, and our English cocker spaniel, Pippin, cooking for our two boys, Lewis and Luke, now 21 and 18, my part-time job at local libraries and volunteering at our church.

But in 2008, I fell ill with pneumonia and my breathing never went back to normal. My doctor couldn't detect anything, but the symptoms got worse until four years later, after dozens of tests, I had my

diagnosis: idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a rare disease that causes your lungs to dry up until you can't breathe. There was no cure, no approved drugs that could help and - without a lung transplant - a life expectancy of fewer than five years.

I joined the transplant list in February 2013 and was told to wait for the phone call. For the first few days, weeks and months, every time

Precious times: the family in Joyce's favourite holiday spot, overlooking Fistral Beach in Cornwall

the phone rang, the boys would look at one another as Colin rushed to get my hospital bag and I answered the call with a silent prayer - only to hear the voice of a concerned friend on the end of the line, just calling to see how I was. Looking over at the boys and seeing the disappointment on their faces was crushing.

The longer I waited, the more my old life faded away. I had to give up work because I needed to be on oxygen all the time.

I would just sit in a chair all day - I couldn't even read or do jigsaws because the medication meant I couldn't concentrate. My friends and family rallied round to help, and I found support at the British Lung Foundation. Although I was so very grateful, I felt embarrassed. My life had suddenly become something I didn't want it to be, and I was helpless.

Worst of all, my dreams and plans for the future had been stolen from me. You imagine how one day you will hold your first grandchild, or you do something simple like keep





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And as the months passed, while other patients had as many as 15 phone calls before they finally got their match, I didn't receive a single call from the hospital. I had always planned to have a big party for my 50th, but it was impossible and instead friends visited me at home.

By Christmas Eve, I was in a bad way. It's a family tradition for us to have dinner at our local Italian restaurant, just a minute's walk away from where we live. But this time, it took me half an hour to walk home. My friends, church and family had all been praying for a Christmas miracle for me, and if it didn't come, it looked as if this would be my last celebration.

So, instead of having a house full of family and friends as usual, I kept last year to just the four of us, our most special and intimate family Christmas. I couldn't take my eyes off my sons, watching their faces while they chopped vegetables or read. I was like a sponge, soaking up every precious moment with them.

I managed to see past the worry of the sickness hanging over us, and to spend the day chatting and having fun. Although I was weak and believed I didn't have long left, my family were strong, and their love gave me strength, too. As we sat together on the sofa watching Doctor Who, I felt so incredibly lucky. People travel the world over to find what they're looking for, but I had everything I'd ever wanted right there in that room, and despite everything, I felt truly blessed.

Two days later I was diagnosed with a chest infection and prescribed antibiotics. I rang the hospital to tell them what was happening. I spoke to a woman called Katey who tried to keep my spirits up. "You'll stay on the list, and I might be ringing you on New Year's Day to tell you we've found a pair of lungs," she said.

We celebrated New Year's Eve

'People travel the world over to find what they're looking for, but I had everything I'd ever wanted, right there in that room'



Joyce: 'My donor's family are always in my thoughts'

with friends and I took my last dose of antibiotics. Although I was too ill to eat the delicious meal that Colin had cooked, I tried to make the most of my two forkfuls and a sip of Champagne at midnight. As everyone else chatted about their plans for the coming year, I batted away the thought that I probably wouldn't be here to see them. At about 2am, once our guests had left and the boys had come home, Colin and I went to bed, tired but happy.

At 5.20am the phone rang. I had been fast asleep but I sat bolt upright. There was only one thing it could be: this was the call I'd been waiting for. I nudged Colin gently to wake him up, answered the phone, and it was the same woman I had spoken to five days earlier. She said: "Joyce, it's Katey – you're not going to believe this, but I think we've got you some new lungs!"

Katey told me to make my way to the hospital. There was just one problem: Colin would be over the

limit after the celebrations the night before, so couldn't drive me. That's when I realised that all our contingency plans had been thrown out of the window. Just hours after ringing in the New Year, none of the friends and family I had on speed dial would be able to drive us either. Crazy as it sounds, the only thing I could think was, there was no way I would be paying double fare in a taxi! I would have to drive myself.

But then came the hard part. I had to say goodbye to my boys. After their night of celebrations, they were still half asleep and didn't understand the enormity of what was going on. I knew this might be the last time I ever spoke to them, and leaving them was one of the most horrible things I've ever had to do.

The surgery lasted 13 hours, and it wasn't easy. The surgeon told Colin if I'd had to wait any longer, it would have been too late – but if the call had come on Christmas Day or when I was on antibiotics, the chest infection would have made the transplant impossible. The timing was incredible. It could only be described as a miracle.

I've made a good recovery and, step by step, we're rebuilding our lives. We don't know what the future holds, but this experience has shown me that life isn't about bucket lists or travelling to exotic places. It's about the silly things that you suddenly realise mean the world to you. When I first managed to make a cake after my transplant, I was delighted. And when Colin and I took Pippin and the boys to Cornwall, I stood on my favourite spot, overlooking Fistral Beach, and cried. I'd thought I'd never see that beautiful place again, and there I was looking at it. I'd never felt so alive.

Instead of praying for a Christmas miracle this year, it will be my donor's family who are in my thoughts – they always are. In their darkest moment, when they lost a loved one, they managed to bring light and hope into my life, and they're always with me. I will never forget their wonderful gift that saved my life. □