

Living with TERMINAL CANCER

Everything changed when Becci Edmondson found out her husband only had a year left

Nothing can prepare you for finding out your other half has cancer. A million scenarios run through your head at lightning pace, each posing a crucial question. How will we tell the kids? Will I become a single parent? How long do we have left together?

When my husband of nine years Mark, then 34, started experiencing abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, rectal bleeding and weight loss in late 2016, he was quick to see his GP. He thought it was IBS or IBD, but test after test came back clear.

With no explanation as to what was causing these worrying symptoms and his doctor suspecting Crohn's disease, he was referred for a colonoscopy.

I was at work in my job as a product owner

on the day of Mark's appointment. Sitting at my desk, I heard my phone buzzing and saw Mark's name appear on the screen. I knew he must finally have an answer for his symptoms and I felt a sense of relief.

But, as I stepped out of my office, I'd barely even greeted him before he blurted out the terrible news. 'I've got cancer.'

I was dumbfounded. As tears welled in my eyes, Mark explained that he was awake, watching the screen during the colonoscopy. An angry-looking cyst had appeared and the technician's face had dropped before he said he was almost certain it was colon cancer.

Mark had always been endlessly positive and pragmatic – it was something which had drawn me to him when we'd met through a mutual friend in 2004, and a quality he'd tried to instil in our two boys, Finn, then five, and Wilf, three. He took this news with that same attitude.

We agreed they must've caught it early, that he was young and healthy, and that he could and would beat this.

A week later, in May 2017, we sat, our hands gripped together, in front of the oncologist. As he talked us through Mark's scans and the

results of the biopsy, our hope began to dwindle.

The cancer had already spread, with 33 tumours in his liver appearing as one singular mass the size of a honeydew melon. At this point, I still believed he could fight it. But then the oncologist said the one word we had dreaded – terminal. Mark had stage 4 colon cancer, and my lovely, funny husband only had between nine months and a year to live.

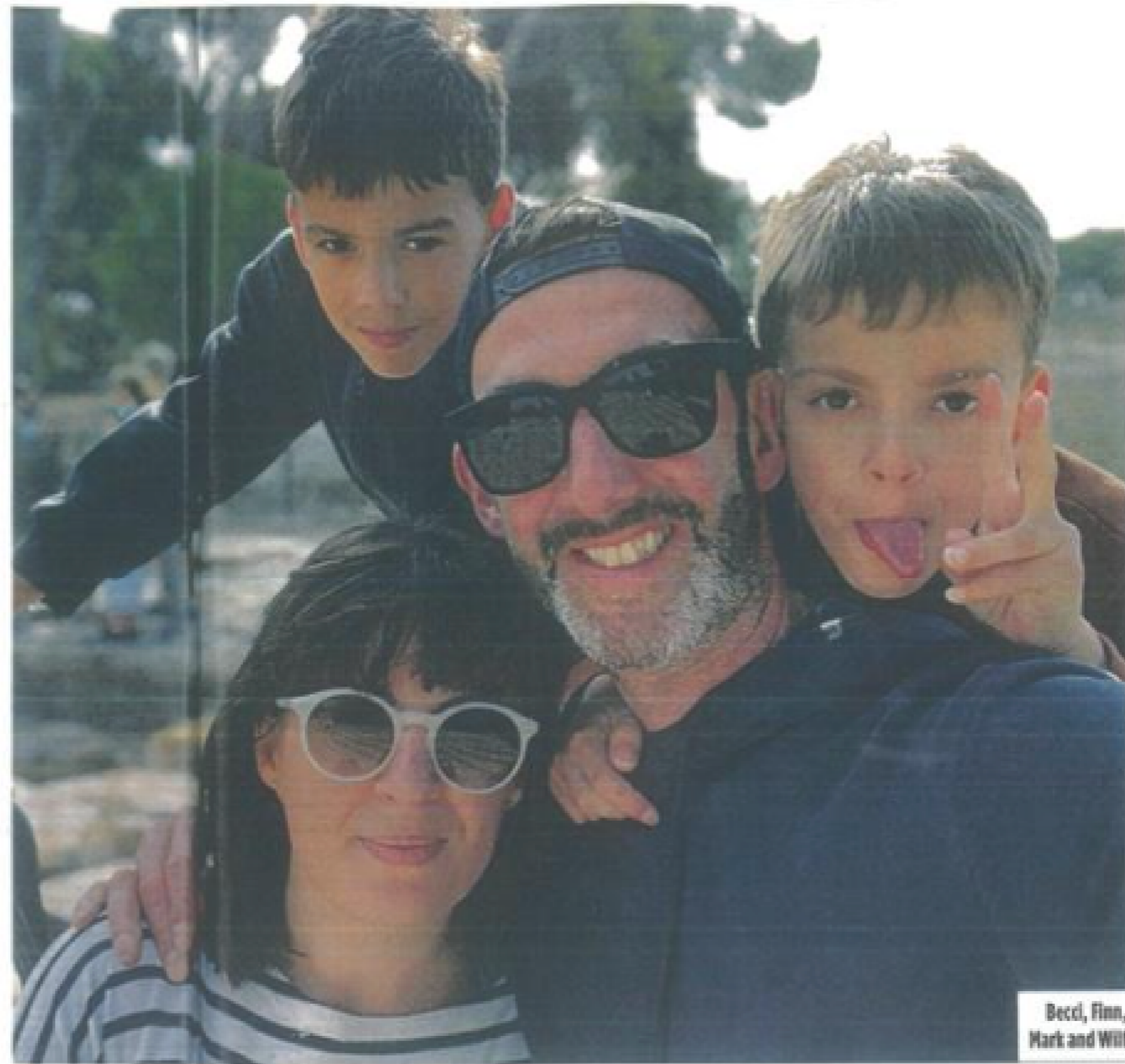
It was a surreal moment and, while my hand clutched Mark's tightly, my mind immediately turned to Finn and Wilf. How could they lose their daddy, who played with them and read to them? How would I raise them alone? It felt like a terrible dream. Mark listened to the doctor, his face blank.

Struggling to take it in

Back home, in a state of shock, we decided not to tell the children just yet. We clung to each other, tears streaming. I couldn't imagine life without Mark, my best friend. I kept waiting to wake from an awful dream.

The following day, a palliative care team came to see us at home and talked us through what Mark's final months might look like. They explained how he would receive chemo and how he might react to it. There was also a discussion about hospice care. It felt like they were talking about someone else's lives, not ours.

The reality only set in when they started to give us guidance on how to tell Finn and Wilf their daddy was sick. I shuddered just



Becci, Finn, Mark and Wilf

thinking about the prospect.

Days later, we sat the kids down and told them Daddy was very poorly, that he needed medicine to help, and that he would try his best to get better but he might not. I watched in anguish as their sweet faces scrunched into sadness and confusion, far too young to comprehend what we were telling them.

Thankfully, through his company, Mark, who was head of sales for an online obituary site, was able to have private medical care which meant access to treatments not used by the NHS. Immunotherapy, where the immune system is stimulated to increase its natural ability to fight

disease, was deployed alongside the chemo. He started the treatment straight away, giving up alcohol and following a strict vegan diet. As ever, he remained stoical and positive, recording videos for the kids for moments in their lives he might miss: like their first days of school and graduation.

But Mark started to be more practical too. We organised our finances and he even started to plan his own funeral, choosing music and readings.

Only, despite Mark's positive outlook,

I was struggling to come to terms with this new, wretched life. Watching him in pain and exhausted going through chemo, not knowing whether he would still be here in a matter of weeks, fearing how I'd cope as a single mum, emotionally and financially.

Rightly, people flocked to Mark, asking how he was, if there was anything they could do for him, but sometimes I felt alone.

'Mark started to plan his own funeral'

I was trying to juggle my family, my terminally ill husband, my career as well as my own grief.

Three months after his diagnosis, a scan showed Mark's tumours had stopped growing and weren't spreading any further,

as they'd initially predicted they would. It offered us a small glimmer of hope.

Time flew, and suddenly, Mark had made it past his nine-to-12-months prognosis and was referred to a specialist surgeon at the Princess Grace Hospital in central London, where he started a series of laser ablation operations to remove three tumours at a time from his liver.

Each day Mark was still with us felt like a blessing. We weren't going to waste a single second. We went on holiday to the Maldives

in April 2018, then he went with friends to the Mad Cool festival, even watched the Grand Prix in Abu Dhabi.

An unexpected outcome

Two years after he was given a year to live, my brave husband was declared cancer-free. The treatments had worked.

Now, five years from his prognosis, after 121 chemotherapy sessions and 15 surgeries, he is still cancer-free. At his six-month scans, there are sometimes masses on his liver which he has to have ablated, but he's recovered and kept the cancer at bay.

He's on medication that leaves his skin horrendously dry and his mouth sensitive, but while it's unlikely he'll ever recover completely as without treatment the tumours will return, he's living a normal life. He still practises yoga and works four days a week.

My husband having cancer changed our perspective on life completely. Before, he was so focused on his career; now he wants to get the most out of life. This year, he took Wilf, now nine, to Legoland for a special one-on-one night away in the hotel, and he took Finn, 11, to Glasgow, as he longed to visit another country. It's amazing for him to be able to do these incredible trips and make special memories with our boys.

I'm incredibly grateful watching Mark playing with our sons, working and going on holidays. We don't know what time we have left together, but any we do have is a blessing.

'I REFUSED TO LET MY CANCER DEFINE ME'

Mark says: 'After my initial diagnosis, I'd sit hugging my kids so hard, not knowing what I could say. I didn't want to write letters. I wanted them to hear and see me, so I recorded a series of videos for them and all my loved ones to watch at key points when I'd gone.'

'I explained what each of them meant to me, that they had so much to live for, that I'd never leave them. But after I responded well to treatment, I thought I just might have a chance.'

'I embraced my new diet, exercise regime and daily meditation, yoga and acupuncture, and refused to let my cancer define me.'

'My oncologist describes my story as truly exceptional. All I know is that being given a terminal cancer diagnosis and surviving it has given me a perspective on life that I value more than anything.'



Mark's positive attitude helped him through



Becci's boys on holiday in Italy