

## **Episode 112: Courtney's mom chose when to die**

One of the most difficult things we go through in life is when a close friend or a family member dies.

We all know it's gonna happen to a lot of the people we know and love, but it's still unpleasant, and uncomfortable, and sad. We even try to avoid using the word "die" – somehow it doesn't sound quite so bad if we instead say, "they passed away".

But as awful as death can be, there are times when it's actually a relief. What if your loved one has a terminal disease, and they're just in pain all the time, and they know that their body is not going to heal? The idea of death, and the peaceful rest that it brings, can then be something that's very appealing.

We're talking today about medical assistance in dying. It's also called assisted suicide. It's something that brings welcome relief to people who are suffering.

You're about to hear my guest, Courtney, talk about her own experience with this matter. It wasn't that long ago that she wasn't really even familiar with this idea, or that it was even legal where she lives, which is in Canada. But now, she has personally observed how it works and how beneficial it can be.

This is the heartbreaking - and wonderful - story of the choice that was made by Courtney's mom.

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### **Scott**

What's one word you would use to describe your mom?

### **Courtney**

I don't think it would be possible to do one word. When I think of her, I just think of a hard-working farmer's daughter who just did absolutely everything for her family, for myself, and for my brother. She always put us first every single time and she always put herself last.

### **Scott**

Tell us who was in your immediate family. You mentioned brothers. Who else is in the family?

### **Courtney**

There's me - I'm 36 - and then my brother - he's 34. My mom met my stepdad when he and I were probably, like, three and five years old. They had my youngest brother, who is 24.

### **Scott**

How old was your mom when she was diagnosed with cancer?

### **Courtney**

She was, like, a month before her 60th birthday. So, she was 59. I remember it was September of 2019, and her birthday is in October. She phoned me and said, "I just want to let you know that I had gone to the doctor. They found a lump in my breast. They're sending me for tests. It could be nothing. It could be something. No need to panic. I just want to keep you in the loop

and discuss this with you.” So, I said, “Okay. There's nothing I can do about this now. Let's wait to see the test results before we really get worked up about, maybe, something that's potentially not an issue.” So, it came back and it was obviously breast cancer. She was going to start chemotherapy the day after her 60th birthday.

My brothers and I said, “We need to do something really special not just because of this but because it's going to be her 60th birthday. We need to really, like, do something great.” So, for her 60th birthday, we got my entire extended family - my grandma, aunts, uncles and cousins - and all of us rented this big room. I was at a restaurant. We had a really nice dinner. We got her and my stepdad a hotel downtown where I live, overlooking the water with a balcony. One of my good friends is a photographer. So, as a surprise, I got him to meet us down there before dinner to take a family photo because - I don't know why I did that - we didn't have one. We had a family photo from when I was, maybe, 13 or something but she was a mom, she took the pictures, so she wasn't in them. We were all dressed up and it was super fun. So, I just really wanted that memory. Maybe, in my mind, too, I thought, “Who knows what's gonna happen?” Selfishly, I really wanted that family photo. So, we did that and it was wonderful. The picture is blown up in the house - it's huge, it's gorgeous - and I'm really thankful that we did that.

**Scott**

My mom's the same way. She loves when - we don't do it often enough - when all the kids and everybody gets together for a family photo. That's like the best thing for her.

**Courtney**

Oh, yeah. It's the best thing. The funny thing is that my brothers and I always made fun of her because every photo she would take was blurry - it didn't matter what it was. It could have been a race car going by or a flower in the garden. It was always blurry, so we always teased her about that. It was quite funny.

**Scott**

I'm guessing that you organized that restaurant dinner? Did that have anything to do with the fact that you're the firstborn?

**Courtney**

Yeah, pretty much. I'm the oldest and the boys are boys - they just do what they're asked of basically - but we know we were all on board. We sort of threw around some ideas and one of them booked the hotel and we all split everything. But yeah, for sure. It was mostly my idea, but they were definitely on board and super helpful.

**Scott**

That evening has to be just such a great memory for all of you.

**Courtney**

It was so nice. We have photos and selfies. My mom just looked so happy, I remember, because she was starting chemo the next day. There are some types of chemotherapy where you don't lose your hair. They had said that she would lose her hair in this type of chemo. She always really liked PINK, the musician - the girl, PINK. She always had this shaved side or whatever. So, she said, “Wait till you see my hair for the dinner.” I said, “What are you going to do?” She said, “I'm not telling.” She had this new outfit. She showed up and had a little bit of makeup on. She'd gone to the hairdresser's. She had shaved the sides of her hair off, so the top was really long and she had, like, French braided back. It was really gorgeous and it really,

really suited her. She felt so cool and she looked really cool. She was super happy. So, we have those pictures. She got color in her face and she really loved that time together.

**Scott**

We'll have that family picture on the website for this episode then so that people can see that. She started treatment the next day...

**Courtney**

She did. She started chemo the next day. I mean, it wasn't easy. She was pretty sick, but not really as bad as I thought - if I remember correctly. She was sick and she didn't have a lot of energy, but she was a trooper. I think it was only four weeks later when she lost her hair. So, that was, like, a big change for her. I remember ordering her these, like, little stylish beanies. She really loved camo, so it was, like, this little camo beanie specifically for people who have lost their hair to chemotherapy. So, you can wear them in the summer - it's not like a winter toque or something. I remember sending her a bunch of those and she really liked that. She did chemo and she did radiation on the breast, and that all seemed good. Then, once chemo was complete, she had breast surgery in March of 2020. She did really well. I think my brothers and stepdad were there while I was stuck at work that day. Yeah, she did pretty good. I mean, as soon as she got home, it was basically March of 2020. COVID hit right at that same point. So, pretty soon after that, we had to be super careful because of how sick she was. We had to protect her regardless - it was a lot with COVID.

**Scott**

So, her immunity, obviously, was already compromised in some ways. Then, March of 2020 was when it all started. Did she continue treatment after that?

**Courtney**

She did, I think, a little. In April, she was sort of feeling off-balance, a little disoriented, and things like that. So, she went for a checkup or something of the sort anyways and they found that, at that point, she had a brain tumor. So, she had brain cancer at this point when we were, like, very hopeful with the breast cancer. I mean, not to downplay it, but my family doctor reassured me and said, "Nobody wants to have cancer but if you're going to get it, breast cancer's the one to get. It's highly treatable. Chances are you going to be fine." Then, when my stepdad called and told us, I just couldn't believe it. Like, I don't really want to admit it. Like, who's going to come back after brain cancer? So that was really scary.

**Scott**

What a surprise. I mean, it almost seems like they're unrelated.

**Courtney**

Definitely. As far as I know, they were. So, in April of 2020, she had to have brain surgery weeks after COVID had just started, and that aspect alone was really scary. My mom and my stepdad did absolutely everything. They were never apart. They were together. I say "my stepdad", but he's my dad. They were together for 30 years and they just had, like, a love that I've never seen. So, it was heartbreaking because he had to drive her to the hospital and drop her off at the front door for her to walk in and have brain surgery. It was terrible. My brothers and I were at home and we were helpless. We couldn't go. What do you do? You just do the dishes, cut the grass, and get your groceries. It just feels really gross to not be involved in some way.

**Scott**

You have to feel like you're helping somehow, but all you could do is sit and wait for somebody to tell you what the developments are.

**Courtney**

For sure. And because the hospitals were so chaotic at that point, we found ourselves really relying on her to phone us and update us, which was just another layer, right? The nurses and such would call my dad and give them updates, but we were relying on her to text her or phone that she just had brain surgery. I remember when she FaceTimed me that night and she looked great. She was like, "Well, I have a little bit of a headache" and I laughed so hard. I said, "Yeah, you think?" So, she made a bit of a joke about it but, again, she did great. She had to spend, I think, a week in there and I just felt so sorry that I couldn't be there. She said, "Well, I actually like it. With the brain surgery, I don't want loud noises. I just want calm. I don't want my phone. I don't want to watch a show. I just want to sit here and be quiet. If everyone was allowed in here, it would honestly just be way too much." I thought, "Okay, good. Great." So that honestly made me feel much better.

**Scott**

She sounds like a really resilient person.

**Courtney**

Oh my god. Just yes. Going back, it was that surgery that made us feel how helpless we were. I live in Ontario, Canada, and this is in Kingston, actually. The hospital is KJH and it's right by Lake Ontario. I wanted her to, like, feel our support and our love, so I made this huge 3' by 3' sign. On a white sign in massive black letters, we wrote, "We love you." Me, my partner, my daughter - who was 3 or so at the time - and my brother and his now wife went down, stood on the helipad, and held this sign. She was seven stories up, so I called and said, "Look out your window!" and she did. She could see us and it just felt so good. So, we were on the phone with her at the same time. It's like, "Can you see it?" She said, "I can see it." I could hear her telling the nurses, like, "Come see this. Come look! These are my kids!" It was really great. She took a picture of us from the seventh floor and sent it to us later, and we look like little ants, but it was really nice. That was one of the photos that I sent to you. That's my brother - he's on the phone talking to her - and I was hugging him. When I look at that picture every day of my life, I just think that this is the most raw and the most real photo I've ever been a part of in my life.

**Scott**

In what way? Can you elaborate on that?

**Courtney**

I mean, when I just look at it, I just feel all the love that we had for her at that moment and, like, how good it felt to show her that we were there. I was hugging my brother so tight and I was loving him. At the same time, the hug is because I feel so sad for him. It's just a raw photo.

**Scott**

That's a real photo. A lot of times, in family photos or snapshots, you smile for the camera and don't really even think about it, but you were really in the moment there...

**Courtney**

Yeah, my sister-in-law took that and I'm just so grateful. It's a wonderful memory of "We couldn't be there in the hospital" but it was really great. She was so happy and just felt so good that we had done that, and that makes us feel good.

**Scott**

Yeah. At the time when that picture was taken, even though she wasn't in the picture, you knew she was feeling happy at that moment.

**Courtney**

Absolutely, yeah. She probably spent another week there at the hospital and then came home. Her life was full of appointments, checkups, this and that, so she was pretty busy. In June of 2020, she did radiation on her brain for the spot in which they did the surgery. It seemed to go well. In September of 2020, she started chemo again. This time, she did the pill form - last time, she had to go to the hospital and get hooked up to the IV. So, she did that and she probably didn't, like, feel the best but, by October, she was feeling really good. Her hair was coming back. She liked it. It was really curly. She said, "All I want to do is to be able to go outside and have enough energy to cut the grass and go back to that hard work. I want to go cut the grass." So, she did it. She accomplished her goal. She got out there. She cut the grass. Dad sent a picture of her just smiling and being so proud of herself, and we were really proud of her too. It seemed really good. I don't know how one has brain cancer and, then, can continue on this life totally healed and be great. To us, she was doing it and we were all in the clear. I mean, it was still a road, but we had sort of thought that we were over that hump.

**Scott**

Did you and your brothers live nearby? Were you all local to each other?

**Courtney**

Somewhat. I mean, we're only 30 minutes away,

**Scott**

So, that's not bad then.

**Courtney**

No. We could easily go home and we did. Sometimes, we stood at the window. After her first brain surgery, she got into the hospital and went home. My dad propped her up in front of the window and opened the window a little bit - it was COVID so we were careful. We stood in the driveway, talked to her, dropped off some food, and whatnot. I mean, that was really hard. You just want to be able to hug that person, but you have to look at them through a window.

**Scott**

Yeah. When they're most desperately in need of a hug, it must be really difficult for a lot of people during that time.

**Courtney**

Right. So in our family, we're so close. We went home every Christmas even as adults. Most people pop into their parents' house and have dinner. We went home every Christmas, spent the night on Christmas Eve, had drinks, played board games, laughed our heads off, spent the night, and we all woke up Christmas morning. I mean, even after I had my daughter, we take her to my mom's house and we'd all do it together. So, December 2020 was the first Christmas that we spent apart because she was so susceptible, and it's COVID. My youngest brother is a

paramedic, so he's out there doing his thing - who knows what he's doing. My brother works on a job site. I was working at a university here with just the highest COVID rates. So, it really was best to stay away. So, that was an experience to not be together for Christmas. Again, we were really hopeful and she was getting her energy back. In the spring, it was my grandma's birthday, so she would come to that and - not in a wheelchair or anything like that - she was good. She walked around. There are pictures of her and my grandma. We had cake and the whole thing. So, we really were thinking that we were coming to the safe zone. It felt like things were going back to normal.

**Scott**

Did she feel that way too? Like, "I'm glad I've beaten this."?

**Courtney**

Yeah, I don't think we said cancer free, but that was definitely what we were thinking. All of our tests were great. Everything was great. Everything was coming back. She was doing all the right things. Like I said, she had energy and there was color in her face and all those things. So, in June of 2021, she was feeling-- I don't remember how she was feeling honestly. I think she was just feeling unstable and that sort of thing, so she went and had an MRI. Actually, one of my cousins is the MRI technician there. So, she did the MRI and she looked at my mom and said, "You need to go down to the hospital and just to have a conversation with the doctor." She looked at her and said, "Why?" She said like, "Just go have a conversation with the doctor." Obviously, if everything were fine, she would have gone home and there would be no reason for her to send her to the hospital other than something bad. I remember my mom telling me that she just looked at my cousin and she said, "I'm going to die, aren't I?" She said, "Just go. Just go down there." So, she did. Again, my dad dropped her off at the front door and they found that the brain tumors were back. Yeah, the brain tumors were back. So, in June of 2021, she had a second emergency brain surgery, and that was really tough. That time was really scary - I mean, not that the other times weren't.

Due to COVID restrictions, at that point, they would let my dad or one person go in and see her - it didn't matter who. It could have been one of my brothers. It could have been myself. It could have been my dad. But, whoever that person was couldn't change. So, if I had gone on day one, no one else would be allowed in except myself. We wanted her and my dad to be together. So, he went in. I remember just having just such a bad day, and I just wanted to see her, and I wanted to just be near her. I remember going to the hospital and thinking, like, "I was so slick. I was going to just be super cool about it. Knowing the rules and knowing that my dad was the one on the list, I was just gonna fake it and try to pull one over." So, I went in and I said, "Hi, I'm just here to see my mom." They said, "Okay, great. What's your name?" I said, "Courtney. Okay, let me just call up." So, they called up and I was like, "Oh, well, that was easy." The nurse on the other end of the line must have said like, "Oh, well, her dad was already here, so whatever." Obviously, I was found out.

**Scott**

You didn't pull off that caper...

**Courtney**

I didn't. I tried my damndest but it didn't work. I remember she said, "I'm really sorry you can't go up" and blah, blah, blah. It wasn't her fault. I just, like, hated that girl so much. I walked outside and phoned whatever nurse was upstairs on the floor, and begged her. I said, "Please. I will wear 20 masks. I will stand in the hallway. I don't care. Please let me come." She said, "No,

you can't." I remember just sitting out front of the hospital in the evening and sobbing. I just cried. I felt so helpless. Again, what could I do? I just drove home.

**Scott**

I'm sure that nurse felt your pain as well because she probably has to tell other people the same thing.

**Courtney**

Yeah. So while she was there, amidst the brain cancer, it had gone everywhere - it was in her skin, her lungs, breast, brain, and lymph nodes. It was just everywhere and it wasn't going to be stopped, so that was really hard to come to terms with - that was in June. I remember, in July, one of my best friends - who I've known since I was little - and I have daughters the same age, and they just love each other. So, we've been friends for over 30 years. Anyways, we went to her cottage for the night - just us and the girls. The girls had gone to bed. We were sitting by the fire and having a glass of wine, and she's a nurse at that hospital. Obviously, it was COVID and she was having a really hard time. She was stressed out and all these things. I don't know what provoked me to say - I felt like such a shitty friend - something like "Oh, you're feeling down? Let's really get into it. What's the worst thing that you've ever had to do?"

She said to me that it's not the floor that she works on - that's not her specialty - but there was a doctor who needed help with a medically assisted death. I looked at her and said, "Is that even legal?" She was like, "Yeah, it is. I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't prepared that you just needed me to be there for whatever reason. I just went in and stood at the back of the room." I remember her explaining her experience to me and she said that it was just this man and his wife. She said, "I just kept looking at his pajamas and thinking, 'How do you just wake up in the morning, pick out these pajamas, drive yourself to the hospital, pass away, and these are the pajamas you want to wear.' I don't know why that stuck out in her mind, and that really stuck with me about this man and the pajamas." I said, "What was the wife doing?" She said, "They were obviously just saying 'I love you' and that sort of thing." She sort of described the process vaguely. I said, "Were you upset?" She said, "I was bawling behind my mask, but I was trying to be professional. I had no idea what to expect. This was just thrown at me. I'm trying not to cry, but it was a lot." I thought, "Wow, yeah. That is a lot. No wonder you're stressed out about work." I mean, my first response to her was, "Is that even legal?" So, that was sort of the first time I have ever heard of something like that.

**Scott**

What she was talking about is this program in Canada called - it's abbreviated MAID - Medically Assisted In Dying. So you've never heard about that before?

**Courtney**

No, I guess not until she had, sort of, said so. I mean, I guess I maybe had some sort of idea that it was a thing, but I didn't think it was legal in Canada, and I certainly never heard of anyone else doing something like that.

**Scott**

When you were talking about this, did it immediately come to your mind that "This is what my mom should do"?

**Courtney**

No, God, not once. I was just listening to her story and thinking, like, "Wow, what a shitty day at work. That's heavy." Not once did that cross my mind at all. That was all her experience. That's as far as it went in my brain - sympathy for her and her having to be there. It was August 3 - it was a Tuesday. My stepdad said, "I want to talk to you guys. I'm going to FaceTime you at whatever time." So, my stepdad FaceTimed me and both of my brothers. You can tell that my mom was not around. Because she, sort of, lost a bit of mobility and couldn't text and hold the phone, he would always text back for her or hold the phone while she talked to us sometimes. You could just you could tell she wasn't around and that he really had something to share with us.

He said, "There are two things that I want to tell you. Your mom has decided that she wants to do a medically assisted death. Also, she would like for you guys to be there." We were all just silent. I didn't say another word during that whole conversation. I have no idea what my brother said, honestly, but I do remember one of them saying, "Is that even legal?" Obviously, he said it was. One of us said, "What do you mean? When?" He said, "It could be as soon as a week from now. She has to be assessed. There has to be a COVID test. There has to be a place for her - a spot for her - at the hospital. So I don't really know. But this is the plan." I have no idea what else was said, but I just hung up the phone. I've never felt a feeling like that before. I was sobbing. It was like my body was in pain - like my skin was irritating me, being on my body. It's the weirdest thing to explain, but you just wanted to, like, get your own skin off. It was hurting and there was nothing you could do. It was just horrible.

I remember I gave it a little while and phoned her that night. I FaceTimed her and she was upset. I know that she was very comfortable with her decision but, I know, especially as a mom, how hard it would be to tell your kids that you got to leave them. I fully understand why she made that choice. I fully support her. I'm even happy that she got to that she got to make that choice. My doctor said, "Cancer has controlled your mom's life for two years and she finally gets to be the one in control." I felt happy for her that she didn't get to make that choice.

The next day was Tuesday. The doctors had to come - in this case, anyways - to the house and do, sort of, a mental assessment. They want to make sure that you're of clear mind, you're making this decision on your own, no one's forcing you, and this is what you want. They tell you all the rules and what to expect. After you have all the information, you have to be the one to fully consent, so she did obviously. They gave her a COVID test because it's COVID. She had to be negative in order to go into the hospital which, I guess, doesn't make much sense. Anyways, she did the COVID test and she passed - she was negative. So, the day after was Thursday, August 5.

She was going to go to palliative care at the hospital closest to where we lived. She had to go by ambulance. She was having a lot of difficulties walking and getting in and out of the car, or up and down the stairs, and out of the house, so it was the smartest decision to have her go by ambulance - it was the safest. My brother, being a pair of medic, called the coworkers who he really respected and told them the situation. I remember it was their day off and they still put on their uniform, got the ambulance, brought it to our house, picked up my mom, and to support my brother. I thought that was just so kind.

### **Scott**

For sure. That's typical of the brotherhood of EMTs and paramedics.

### **Courtney**



Right. I agree. It was really sweet. She was transported to the hospital. She had a palliative care room and it was a really nice room - it was big, it was spacious. There's like a connecting room off of it with a TV and a pullout couch so that your family members can stay there with you. It's not just like a hospital bed and some creaky chair beside it. They really put a lot of thought into it. Between two rooms, there's a connecting kitchen, so you can make tea or meals or whatever it is that you need. They were really great.

**Scott**

It sounds more like a homey environment in a hospital room.

**Courtney**

For sure. The little connecting room had its own bathroom and a shower, so my dad could have a shower and his own place to sleep. Yeah, it was good. So, we showed up there on Thursday and we spent the whole day together. That morning, I remember not saying anything. My daughter was 4 at that time. I had to somehow explain this to her because I wanted to take her to the hospital the day before to see my mom and to see grandma. She was the only grandchild. She still is the only grandchild. So, she's just everything to her. I remember having to tell her. She was so mature and so sweet. She was so understanding. We sat outside and I said, "We're gonna go to the hospital and we're gonna go see grandma." She said, "Okay." I said, "I just need to tell you that this is going to be the last time that we're going to see grandma because she's very, very, very sick. She's gonna go to heaven." and she just started crying. She cried and cried. We talked about it a little more, but I didn't know how to explain that further to her.

So, we went and she came as well, along with my brothers and my stepdad. We had a visit. I didn't want her to stay the whole day but she had about an hour and she climbed up. I said, "Okay, give Grandma a hug." She got up on her bed, hugged my mom and laid her head on her shoulder, and said, "I love you, grandma." Then, she got down and I walked her out into the hallway - someone was going to come to pick her up for me. We got halfway down the hallway when she stopped and said, "Can I go give Grandma one more hug?" I said, "Yeah, of course." So, she ran back down the hallway, went through the doors, and said, "Grandma, I just want one more hug." So she did and it was really sweet. After she left, we just spent time together. I mean, I'll say it was nice, but it was so much time apart. And we got to crawl in bed with her. My dad had bought her old cell phones - it's a mom's cell phone - so there are things on there from 40 years ago.

**Scott**

Moms don't delete pictures, right?

**Courtney**

No. She had all these things that we had lost because we probably had 100 new cell phones in the last three years, and she had, like, videos from when we were-- not when we were little because there wasn't cell phones. She had videos from years ago. She had the video of my daughter taking her first steps that I had lost long ago. She had all these funny pictures. We would just talk about so many of these things and laughed. We laughed so hard at all the things that we had, sort of, gone up to as a family and it was really nice. It was good. There was nothing else. It was just us. It was the 5 of us in that room and that was it. We had the whole day just to be together. Like I said, they were super accommodating. They said, "You can do whatever you want. We'll bring you the hospital dinner but do whatever you want." As I said before, we're Canadian, so obviously we had to go get her poutine and a couple of pizzas. We

sat around eating poutine and pizza, laughing and chatting. It was nice. I think - I don't want to say - it wasn't so heavy, but we had the next day. So, that day, we just really enjoyed it.

**Scott**

We're okay for today. Let's enjoy right now.

**Courtney**

For sure. Yeah, absolutely.

**Scott**

Probably a lot of old family stories came up...

**Courtney**

We all just, like, made fun of each other and talked about how she and my stepdad met, which is really amazing. My mom had a best friend who lived in town and the friend's dad had passed away, so her family was coming home for this funeral and one of the people was her brother. He was coming home to the small town that we live in for his dad's funeral and he said to her sister, "Whoa, who's your friend?" It turns out that it was my mom. He was only here for a couple of days. He lived out west. I don't know what happened in 3 days, but here's my mom with 2 little kids. He basically said to her within a couple of days, like, "I'm going to go home and pack all of my belongings, and I'm going to move here. Do you want us to be together for the rest of our lives?" She said, "Yes." They loved each other so much - so much that you would think "That's crazy!" I think that's crazy. If I said that, I was going to be, like, "Oh, this is what I'm going to do" and move to another province and be with someone forever, it's like, "Okay..."

**Scott**

Yeah. Everybody would advise you that it's a really bad idea.

**Courtney**

I mean, they might have. But it has been almost 30 years since then, so joke's on them. She was the best mom. She made chocolate chip cookies. She made us spaghetti. She was always driving us to sports - hockey, baseball, and soccer - games. When we were little, when it was just me, my mom, and my brother, she would take us for real-life camping - like, pitch a tent, all your meals are cooked on the fire that you've assembled yourself, and you have to pack all the utensils and other things. She was great at it. She was it was a lot of fun. I have so many memories of going camping with her. One of my mom's hobbies was she collected dimes. She had this huge jar full of dimes. Anytime she got in my car, she'd be like, "Oh my god, Courtney. Look at that!" I'd be like, "It's 4 dimes. You're welcome to take your dimes." Like, she would just go crazy. We bought her Christmas presents. As a joke, we wrapped, like, a roll of dimes from the bank, and she wouldn't give two shits about the present. She was like, "Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" Like, she was crazy about these dimes. It was so funny. My grandma would save her little plastic baggies of them and we'd empty or change drawers and be like, "Okay, have at it." She just was obsessed. It was so funny. I remember she rolled them up while she was home during COVID and she had almost \$1,000 in dimes, so that's quite a lot. I remember saying, like, "Use it to go on a trip." Then, she thought, "Maybe, I'll buy, like, a really good lazy boy or something." I don't think she ever actually did anything with it, but it's funny how excited that would make her.

The next day was Friday, August 6th. They had told us that this would take place at 1 o'clock. It was the most bizarre thing. You can talk to people and say "Oh, my mom's really sick. She's not

doing well." but how do you call someone 4 days before and say my mom's gonna die on Friday at 1 o'clock? It just didn't make sense. That morning, I remember that I set an alarm to get up, get ready to go and do this. I have trouble trying to explain it but I remember picking out an outfit and I want it to look nice. I don't know why this was on my mind, but I thought "I don't want to wear something that I love because I don't want this memory to be attached to it.", so I picked something I'd never worn before so that I could throw it away afterwards, which I did.

So, I got ready. My brothers picked me up and we drove there together. We walked in and it wasn't, like, somber. It was just like-- I don't know. It's sort of hard to explain. My dad wasn't sitting around bawling. He was, like, happy for her because that's what she wanted and she was gonna get to do it her way. So, we all sat around. She had some breakfast. We shared more stories and laughed about things. When someone is sick like that, you don't say, "Well, if you die, then what should I do?" or "What do you want to pass along?" because you just always have this hope. But at that moment, you know that this is going to be it, so you're allowed to say these things that you wouldn't. I remember I said to her, "Whatever Christmas, we would make these bars. We made them all the time and we loved them. I was obsessed with them. Mom, where's the recipe for the bars that we make at Christmas?" She said, "Okay, go into the little kitchen." We had a main kitchen and a side kitchen. She said, "Go into the little kitchen. It's in the cupboard on the right-hand side, and it's in a little blue recipe book - that's where it is." I said, "Okay, great. Perfect." You can talk about these things, as I said.

She wanted to be cremated and she was, sort of, indifferent as to what would happen after that. She thought that if her parents still had the farm, maybe she would like her ashes to be spread there and I could talk to her. I said, "Well, we don't own the farm anymore. So, I don't really like that idea." It was just weird to have this conversation with her. I said, "Obviously, it's your choice, but I would really like for you to have, like, a stone in a spot where we can go and maybe feel that you're there. That's your spot." She was like, "Okay, sure. That sounds good." It was just so weird.

### **Scott**

That's just some bizarre conversations you never would imagine you would have with her.

### **Courtney**

No, never. Like I said, they said it was going to be on Friday, at 1 o'clock. So, we were there. The clocks are, like, those in an elementary school or something. They're great, big clocks with hands on them, and they're noisy. It was at the foot of her bed and it just kept-- in our moments of silence, if we just sat there and held her hand or whatever we were doing, you could just hear this clock and it was driving me nuts. It was so sad. It was giving us all, like, anxiety. She would look at it every now and then, and it was just heartbreaking. She was just watching the clock. Eventually, we took it off the wall and threw it in the hallway, so it wasn't there. Every so often, she would say, "What time is it?" We would say, "Well, it's 11." She'd say, "Okay." Then, some more time would pass and she'd say "What time is it?" We'd say "It's 12.15."

We just loved her. I got in bed with her and held her hand. I remember my youngest brother sat at the foot of her bed and put lotion on her feet. My other brother was on the other side. You know that the time is coming and you know beforehand that the nurse had come in to put the IV in her hand so that it was prepped and ready. So, we were all trying to ignore what this nurse is doing. She couldn't get the bandage and she couldn't get it to work, so she had to get someone else to come. It was just like-- oh, for God's sakes - it was a lot. So, we were just laying with her and it was quiet.

You knew that the time was coming and you hear a knock at the door. When we looked, it was the doctor - he came in. It's fully her choice. He said, "How are you feeling?" She said, "Good." He said, "Do you think you want some more time?" She just sort of looked at us like-- of course, she does, but the time had come, so she said to us, "Okay, come give me your hugs." We all obviously had moments with her and hugged her. She said, "Be a good mom. I know you will be. You're such a good mom and I love you." I remember just hugging her and saying, "I'm so sorry, mom. I love you and I'm gonna miss you so much." My brothers and my dad had their time. I remember looking back at the nurse who was with him and I thought of my dear friend. I looked at that nurse and she was crying behind her mask. Her face was red, her eyes were red, and she was crying.

The doctor went in, sat beside her, got her IV ready, and said, "Once I do this, it'll only be a couple of seconds, probably, and you'll just peacefully go to sleep." We were at her side. I think I was kneeling on the floor and holding her hands. Her eyes were full of tears. She didn't want to leave us. I know she didn't want to leave us, but she didn't want us to watch her suffer, which would have likely been the outcome with everything going on. The doctor sat beside her and I was holding her hand. I remember staring at her and thinking, "Look at me. Just look at me..." She looked me in the eyes, and I just said, "I love you." She said "I love you too."

The doctor looked at her and said, "It was my pleasure to have met you." He did the injection and it was only a few seconds and her eyes just flooded. It really did look like she just peacefully fell asleep. We just continued to hold her hand. We just cried, cried and cried. Then, there comes the point, like, "What do you do now? You don't have to leave, but you don't want to stay looking... You don't understand looking at her this way. It was probably 20 or 30 minutes later when we decided that it was time for us to go, so we left.

**Scott**

Did you all go back to your parents' place? It seems like that's a time when you would all want to be together...

**Courtney**

It does, but we didn't. We all wanted to be alone. My dad really wanted to be alone. He was gonna have to go back to the house. We all offered and wanted to, but he just really wanted to be by himself. The boys and I wanted to be by ourselves too. I drove back with my brother. I remember that I forgot my sweater and he said, "Do you want to go back?" I said, "No. Are you kidding? No. I'll leave it there." It was a small town. One of the nurses in there, like, lived in our town and brought it to me or something - I can't remember. I remember that he genuinely said, "Do you want to go back and get it?"

**Scott**

He wasn't even thinking when he asked that question probably.

**Courtney**

I don't know. We were all just, like, so--

**Scott**

Well, it's not like something like you've been through before.

**Courtney**

For sure.

**Scott**

How did you process it the next few days? I mean, you knew it was coming but you still had to be, in some way, kind of, unprepared for it.

**Courtney**

Definitely unprepared. It all happens so fast. It was like this blow of a conversation that I had no idea and, then, she was gone four days later. So I don't know if I did process it, to be honest. It all was really just a blur. It was weird, it was sad, it was quiet, and it was lonely. There's part of you that is, like, happy for her that she's not suffering. As I tell this, it sounds terrible, which definitely was for my family, but I definitely support people having this opportunity. I really do. So many people are suffering. Honestly, it could be worse. There are just so many more terrible outcomes, and this was really peaceful and there was no suffering. None.

**Scott**

And everyone had time to say everything they wanted to say.

**Courtney**

Yeah, absolutely. That was the nice part. Lots of people lose people tragically, and they don't have those moments. We had those moments. We got to say what we wanted to say. We got to ask the questions that we thought we would want the answers to, and we got to all be together and have spent time together.

**Scott**

You had mentioned that you joined a group - like a 6-week program - for people who have gone through this. Can you describe what that was?

**Courtney**

Soon after, I just felt so alone in that experience. I think I'm not the first person to lose my mom and I'm not the first person to lose someone to cancer. The way in which it happened is that I felt like no one understood. People would say, "Oh, I'm so sorry." and I would say thank you but, in my head, I would think that you have no idea. So, I wanted to connect with someone who understood. I had no idea where to start, but I found this group on Facebook - I forget what it was called - with people who supported that. It turns out that there were a lot of Americans. I felt like it was an inquiry and support page. Some people would say, "I live in Texas and I'm considering this." People would say, "Oh, is it legal in this state? Oh, it's not legal in my state." There were just, sort of, people advocating and asking questions.

I remember making a post in the group, which I don't think I've done in my life. I don't know what I wanted the outcome to be, honestly. I just, sort of, said, "Here's what happened. It was very brief. While I support my mom's decision wholeheartedly, I'm having a lot of trouble forgetting the events of that day." All the comments were, sort of, people who said, "Well, when you're older, you'll understand why your mum made that choice. When you're older, you'll see that these weren't the golden years that your mom had planned for." I was already numb and I was just defeated. I thought, like, "Again, you have no idea. I do support that. I do understand. I'm grateful that she had the choice when a lot of people don't. That wasn't what I was reaching out for. I wanted someone who knew how I was feeling because it felt very lonely."

So, this woman reached out to me. She was from the States and she was a grief counselor. She had said that she had this idea to put together a 6-week grief group for people who had lost a loved one to MAID once it, sort of, became more known and talked about. She said, "I knew that this type of grief was going to be different and there needs to be a space for people." and it was wonderful. It was so good. There were me and 3 sisters, kind of, from my area who had lost their mom, only a few weeks before I had. Then, there was another woman - she was from LA. She lost her husband. We could all just be sad together, so it felt good. We just understood. There was no, like, "Oh, you don't get it." They got it. They understood me. They were there too. They knew how I felt when I said whatever I said.

I still keep in contact with them. I really value making connections with them in those days. It was really good. It was interesting too because the difference between the woman from LA - her experience being in the US and our experience being Canadian - were night and day. I mean, the same outcome but it's not covered financially. It's there. So, people have to figure out how to pay for it. Then, the surviving family members are left with the debt if there is some, I think. I mean, I'm not really sure. I don't know how it works. I don't know if it's different in each state, but I know where she was. The person who was getting the assistance had to be the one to physically administer the dose to themselves, and theirs was by drink, which did not sound like a lovely experience, whatsoever. Our experience was, like, the injection. It took seconds, it was painless and quick. There's a mix, like a cocktail of sorts, that the person has to take themselves, which isn't very pleasant and it's not quick, either.

**Scott**

For someone who has been through this, you would recommend joining a group like that, I would assume?

**Courtney**

I would recommend joining a group or singular therapy or something. But yes. I mean, it's a really lonely thing. If you can find people who understand even just, like, a portion, I think it's really helpful, which is part of the reason why I wanted to speak to you because I tried really hard to find people to connect with and understood, but there was nothing. Anytime I Google "Counseling for medically assisted death", a hundred things would pop out but it's about counseling the patient on how to prepare themselves, things to consider, and XYZ. There was nothing for the people who are there, who experience that loss, who are part of it but are still here. If one person hears this and thinks that girl understands how I'm feeling or she's been there, too, then--

**Scott**

Somebody might be helped by it, for sure, because, as you said, the resources for this are little to none.

**Courtney**

I feel that way.

**Scott**

As we recorded this, this happened about 10 months ago. If you could go back in time to 12 months ago, would you do anything differently?

**Courtney**

Yes.

**Scott**

What would you do?

**Courtney**

We stayed away. We didn't go home because of COVID and we wanted to keep her safe, and we lost those two years. I mean, I would have taken a rapid test and I would have moved in and been there every single day, but we stayed away to keep her safe.

**Scott**

Of course, you can only make decisions based on the information you have at the time, and you thought that was the best thing.

**Courtney**

We did, and she did too. She was very concerned about COVID and how that could affect her and her medication and stuff. So, it's not like she was begging us to be there. We probably would have, but she was very concerned, so we just respected how she felt. We would FaceTime, and we would visit in the backyard, or meet her at the park when she was feeling better before. We would do things like that.

**Scott**

How did you feel for the next few weeks or months? Were there any, like, family events when you got together but it just wasn't quite the same?

**Courtney**

We were planning her celebration of life for her birthday, which was in October. So, we had two months to grieve. I was in charge of all the photos, the boards, and going through all that sort of thing, so that was nice. It really was like an outlet. It felt good to go through all those pictures and relive those memories. I'd send the boys something funny I found. I had my mom's cell phones and it was funny because, growing up, my brother and I didn't like steak or pork chops or anything like that. As we grew older, we found out that we loved it. The reason was that my mom just cooked them so much, so they were always, like, well-done steaks. We're like, "Oh my God. We actually love steak. What is this?"

Going back to when she would take the pictures that were all blurry-- there were so many videos on there of just, like, the floor, her feet, or some little blurbs that she accidentally did. So, I played this one video that was taken years ago. We all just sound so happy and she just sounds like herself. She doesn't know that she's started recording this video. I heard her calling and yelling at my brother upstairs and he was like, "Yeah?" She went, "How do you want your steak done?" You can hear him go, "Rare." She and my brother would never eat a rare steak - like, absolutely not - so, you would hear her go, "Uhhh. I like it a little bit more than that. Maybe, I'll do it just a little bit in between." And he was like, "Yeah, sounds good." I remember laughing so hard because it was just funny. They would be, like, "Yeah, just cook it rare" knowing that you would probably end up around, like, a medium or something. So that was good. I was happy to find that.

The brother closest to my age was going to get married. He was set to get married in September. So, her goal was to make it to his wedding. Obviously, she didn't. So, his wedding was four weeks after she passed and it was sad. I really wanted them to have, like, a beautiful moment together without the focus being that our mom wasn't there. It wasn't this whole big

huge thing - there were just parents and siblings. Each had, like, a grandparent or something. Very, very small. Just us. Really pretty. So they got married here in Kingston down by the water. Two years prior, it was COVID, so there were no events or anything going on. So, it's this field down by the water where they got married, and it's beautiful.

We were taking pictures. They were not just standing in one spot. Everyone's coming and going. They'd go over to her grandma and take the pictures. We'd move around. There were different sorts of scenery. She would take a picture with her brother and then her and her sister. Then, my brothers had a picture together. Then, he said, "Court, come get a picture with me" and I said "Okay." So, I went over to where we were and I put my arm around him. I don't know what kind of human looks down at the ground when they're having their picture taken but, for whatever reason, I looked down and saw this shiny thing, and my heart fell. I thought, "There's no way" and I reached down. Out on the grass in the middle of this field, at the tip of my brother's wedding shoe was a dime. Unbelievable. I picked it up and I just held it in front of his face. We just stared at each other and my jaw just dropped. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't explain this. We all held it together really well, but I just lost it in that. There's nothing around - I can explain this to you. It's an open field. It was crazy.

I just started crying and I said to him, "I'm just gonna take a minute. I'm not going to do the photo right now. Give me a second." I walked away and everyone was, sort of, looking like, "What the hell is her problem? All of a sudden, she was just crying and walking away when everything was fine." My stepdad came over with a Kleenex and was like, "What's wrong?" I couldn't get it out. I was, like, choking on my words, so I calmed myself and said, "Jake was standing on a dime. His foot was on a dime." We all just cried and it was so it was amazing. There's no way to explain that. You can't even say that's a coincidence. It was just wonderful.

### **Scott**

That is amazing. For anyone who is going or has gone through something like this, if they would like to contact you - you've given your permission - we'll have your email address in the show notes so that they can contact you and ask questions or whatever. You're okay with that?

### **Courtney**

Yeah, absolutely.

### **Scott**

In the US, medical assistance in dying remains illegal in a majority of the states. Some people have worked around that by traveling to a state where it's allowed by law. If you're facing this situation with a family member or a friend, it's a good idea to talk to an attorney who has expertise in these matters.

In the episode just before this one, I talked to Margy about losing her dad, who was a hoarder. That prompted this voice mail from a listener, Eric –

### **Eric**

Hey, Scott. Hope all is well. My name is Eric. I absolutely love your show. The newest episode about Margy is probably one of my favorite episodes. When she explained about the moth infestation, that was disgusting but probably one of the funniest things I've ever heard. I was laughing out loud in my kitchen. I can relate to a lot of the story.



My dad has been an active drug user for most of my adolescent to adult life, and continues to be one. With that comes the neglect of home and of himself, in general. I wouldn't qualify him necessarily as a hoarder either, but he definitely is a pack rat. He obviously has a little bit of a mental illness. Plus, the drugs definitely clouded his mind. We had to do something similar in 2017, which was getting the dumpster for him. My dad was selling this house that we grew up in essentially to pay back taxes to a mortgage-free home, unfortunately, that he had accumulated for about 12 years. When cleaning, I kept finding these wrapped-up pieces of tin foil. When I opened them, there were utensils or batteries or just random objects. Over the tin foil, you would wrap black electrical tape really tight - for extra security - to make sure whatever was inside would be safe. My dad worked for a phone company for 34 years, so we had a lot of electrical tape growing up. We have so much of it that it became our general use tape, even for our school projects and wrapping presents on occasion.

These days, my dad rents a small apartment in a family friend's house in the basement. He's still very active in his addiction. I just celebrated over five years from drugs and alcohol. I've managed to create some boundaries about seeing him when he dies, especially around my daughter who just turned 3, which seems to only have caused further distances, unfortunately. The last thing I'll mention is restoring old boxes from his move in my garage-- I was cleaning the garage the other day and one of them was open a little bit. I poked inside and I found a half-used roll of aluminum foil, three rolls of the black electrical tape - two of which had been almost used up - and a dusty picture of my brother, my sister and I. On the back, written with a black pen is "I love my kids". Thanks, Scott.

### **Scott**

And I want to take a minute to thank my friend Bob. Bob creates all the graphics you see for each episode of the podcast, and he's awesome. So if you see a post on Facebook or Reddit or Pinterest with an image promoting a podcast episode, Bob did that and I really appreciate his work. If you need some graphics created, contact me and I'll put you in touch with him.

And there's a new Raw Audio episode that just went live. In this episode, a mountain biker comes across someone on the trail who's been attacked by animal –

### **911 Operator**

*What's the problem? Tell me exactly what happened.*

### **Man 1**

*Okay. I just came across a young girl who was mauled by a bear.*

### **Scott**

A woman calls 911 from her car because she thinks she is witnessing an abduction –

### **Woman**

*I was at a stoplight when a van pulled up next to me and there was a child screaming in the car.*

### **Scott**

And you'll hear ME calling 911, because of something I saw recently while I was driving, just a few weeks ago –

### **Man 2**

*there's a white male that's walking on the sidewalk. 100% naked.*

**Scott**

Yeah, that was an interesting experience! The Raw Audio episodes are bonus episodes available to anyone who supports the podcast for \$5 a month. You can sign up to be a supporter at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support).

And now we have this week's Listener Story. This is how we end every episode – we have a story that's called in from a listener. If you have an interesting story that you can tell in 3-5 minutes, we'd love to hear it! Just call the Podcast Voice Mail line at 727-386-9468, or you can just record the audio on your phone and email it to me.

This week we're hearing from Alex, with a story about shoveling snow when he was growing up.

Thanks for listening, stay safe, and I'll see you in 1 week. Yeah, I said I'll be back here in just a week – because I've got a special bonus episode for you. You're gonna love it. See you then.

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**(Listener Story)**

Hi, my name is Alex. This is how shoveling snow as a kid got me a job later in life when I needed it the most. During snow days and weekends, when we would get a lot of snow in upstate New York, I would go around and shovel people's driveways and walkways, and shovel their cars out. But instead of asking for money first, I would just do the job. I had a little business card that I would take to their door with how much they owed me if they wanted to pay. Some people didn't. Most people did - I'd find it in my mailbox or they would call and have me come pick it up. I did this when I was about 10 or 11. I grew up super poor with not a lot of money. I just had to find things myself. That's how I bought my PS2 in, I think, the year 2000. Years and years later, I experienced a long bout of homelessness, which is what it is. It was an experience that I now know gives me strength and you something I always look back on knowing where I came from.

After years of homelessness, I finally got the strength and be like, "I need to find a better job". So what I did is-- I had a gym membership to Planet Fitness at the time. I took the best clothes I had, washed them in the sink as best as I could - I used hand sanitizing soap to wash them to make them as clean as I could - and hung them outside, and they dried after a day or so. Then, I went and applied to a big box hardware store. The day came for my interview and I was so nervous. I assumed that they would know I was homeless because I was scraggly. I sat down in the interview. A guy walked in, sat down, and looked at me strangely. I first thought, "Oh, he knows immediately. I gotta leave" but I stayed because I really wanted the job.

After maybe 10-20 minutes of interview, he said, "Did you used to live on the road that I used to live on?" I went, "Oh yeah. I lived down there when I was a kid." He was like, "Did you use to shovel my driveway?" I was like, "I've shoveled lots of driveways. I assume that I did." and his face lit up and he said, "I always wondered who did it. I always wondered what happened. I love the drive." He wanted to say that he was so busy working and he didn't get to see his kids as much as he wanted to, me shoveling gave him just that little time to spend with his children before they went to school. So I was like, "Oh, that's really great!" The emotion in his face-- He didn't even interview me anymore. He just gave me the job on the spot. He was like, "If that is the same worth ethic you have now, then you're gonna be perfect for this job." I'll never forget that man and what he did for me because, now, I'm married with children and I have a home of

my own - that all started from that. I can just think back that it all started from that one day of when I started shoveling snow to where I ended up today.