I never realised how much significance custard would bring to my experience of caring for a loved one at end-of-life stage. I've never liked custard. Something which probably stems from school days and that thick yellow stuff that used to come in big silver jugs. Still, at probably one of the lowest points in my life, somehow, custard slid its way back in and is now forever etched in my memory. I'll explain.

My father was Raymond McConville, a clinical and educational psychologist with a glass half full attitude to life and an innate kindness for others that I continue to aspire to. When he was diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic prostrate cancer in February 2022, he accepted the diagnosis with his usual pragmatic and positive approach. He said,: 'I'm almost 80 years old, I've had a great life, and if this is God's will then I have to accept it'.

At the time of his diagnosis, my dad was the primary carer for my mum, who had advanced dementia. A determined (stubborn) man, my daddy insisted on continuing to care for mum alone, despite offers of help, until during the summer of 2022 when he finally agreed that battling his own illness and looking after mum was perhaps a little too much.

The local Trusts were unable to provide domiciliary care and sadly, daddy's illness progressed rapidly, resulting in both parents needing increasing care. In November 2022 when daddy was informed that he had a matter of months, perhaps weeks left to live, I took leave from my job, packed a bag and moved back home.

A typical day from this point forward consisted of me getting my father out of bed around 7am (sometimes later), taking him to the toilet, showering or washing and dressing him and getting him settled in the living room. After that I would try to get him to eat whatever he could tolerate for breakfast, before starting his medication. The Macmillan nurse would phone each day to check on progress and discuss increasing the morphine dose. We didn't get home visits.

After breakfast, daddy would normally return to bed to rest. I would get my mum out of bed, wash and change her and settle her in the living room before getting her some breakfast and then checking on my dad again. Mum's care needs were admittedly somewhat neglected at times, coming secondary to dad's. She also couldn't be left alone for any length of time as it caused her distress. As I was the only person she recognised, she would follow me around the house, needing to be reassured that all was right in her world.

Each day, family members (the mourners) would call to see daddy. These visits – which were mostly unannounced – would consist of people sitting themselves down on the sofa beside my bewildered mum and then waiting for tea and biscuits to be brought to them.

Lunchtimes would consist of supervised feeding of mum and again trying to get dad to eat anything before giving him his meds. In the afternoon, more visitors would arrive and phone calls with medical professionals became a daily routine. The GP, sometimes the community nurse or OT and mum’s social worker, trying to sort a temporary nursing home place for her before daddy’s time came near.

I would somehow manage to organise a dinner around 6pm and then a short while later take my dad to get changed for the night, give him his night-time medication and ensure he was comfortable. Then it would be mum’s turn, before writing up the pain and medications diary I kept each day and retiring to bed myself.

Night times consisted of endless trips to the toilet, sometimes hourly for daddy, and administering breakthrough pain relief at times when he cried because the long-acting morphine wasn’t strong enough to settle the pain. We never got on top of the pain.

On 19 December, when daddy was barely eating and struggling to take his meds, he agreed that perhaps the Hospice was the right place for him to be. It was at this point that the nurse asked if I’d been giving him thickening liquids to help him with his swallow. I didn’t know what thickening liquids were. Custard, I was told, was a good example.

Four days later, on the night of the 23 December, my daddy passed away in the Hospice. I wasn’t with him. My brother was. I was a mile away, sat holding my mum’s hand in the nursing home, trying to calm her as she struggled to come to terms with her new and unfamiliar surroundings.

When I reached the Hospice a few minutes later, my dad was lying peacefully in bed, finally free from pain. In the sadness, and stillness of the room, I looked out of the window at the enormous Christmas tree in the car park, its twinkling lights suddenly seeming a little dimmer. On the windowsill I noticed an empty pot of custard. It was the last thing my daddy ate.