

A 14-YEAR-OLD boy stood at the foot of a stinking hospital bed on a hot June evening in 1977.

He stared at the stick of a woman who lay barely conscious on top of the soiled sheets, her head turned to one side, vomit dribbling down the side of her mouth.

This was one of the country's leading cancer hospitals. I was the young boy and the woman was my mother, aged 43.

I close my eyes 28 years later and see my dying mother. I can feel my own pain, confusion and grief and I can smell death as if it was only yesterday. I did not know what euthanasia was back then — it could have been the name for one of the latest rock bands I had been so fanatical about when growing up.

Since my mother's death euthanasia has never been far from my thoughts. The political controversy about the right to die has dominated newspapers in recent months, and now the debate has been rekindled by the Oscar-nominated Spanish movie *The Sea Inside*, which opens this week.

I am just two years away from the

RICHARD CANNON



Andrew Don's mother, Jean, in 1976, the year before she died

## A CRUEL WAY TO DIE

Andrew Don relives his mother's death from cancer and asks if euthanasia would have been the kindest option

age Mum was when she died. And always at the back of my mind is what if I get it, too? Forty-four — so young to die. I've only just started to live. "Do me a favour, if I get cancer, hit me over the head," I've told my wife, Liz, numerous times.

I fear it, I loathe it, the memories of the effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy haunt me: the degradation of a woman who hardly had a day's illness in her life, reduced to such thinness that you could see her skeleton.

It began, for me, in November 1976 when I woke up in the middle of the night to hear screams coming from the toilet. Mum needed to pee but she couldn't. She became more and more desperate. Eventually, the screams turned to whimpers, exhausted from the effort.

Dad took her to hospital. Cue end of childhood. Chemotherapy, radiotherapy, drug cocktail curiously mixed with orange juice and gin (I never understood that one) until mercifully, she died 21 days after her 44th birthday, although there was little mercy in it. Her demise was the most disgusting thing I have ever witnessed.

And pain control? That was a joke. I know things have come on a lot since then but my mum suffered terribly — tortuous, red hot, crippling pain that gnarled her face like a troll's.

For me, watching my mum — the centre of my universe, both my heroine and my tormenter — die in front of my eyes; her helpless, me helpless to do anything for her, irreversibly changed who I was.

I remember finding her in tears once because a nurse had said to her: "Do you want to know how it will happen?" She was not ready to hear it but the nurse told her anyway.

Mum gripped hold of my arm crying: "I don't want to die, I don't want to die." My tears fell and just kept on coming, as they do now as I relive this.

I held her there, on the bed of that lonely, dull room, only starting to comprehend on some level for the first time that Mum was really going to

die. My dad and older sister had tried to keep it from me for as long as they could, but I was not stupid: I could see what was happening in front of my eyes, although I tried to hide from it and pretend it was not real.

It took an explosion of anger from my sister: "She's got cancer, you bastard. She's going to die" for reality to strike home. Judith did me a big favour. I needed to know and I had provoked her sorely by playing the Funeral March over and over again on the piano. I slid down the stall into a heap on the floor. So now there was no more pretending.

On August 13 I kissed my mother goodbye at Heathrow. I was off to spend the summer with my auntie Wendy and her family in Israel. As I passed through passport control, I took one last look at the woman who gave birth to me, hunched over a Zim-

**'I don't want to die, I don't want to die,' she said, even when in despair and pain**

mer frame. She died on August 27 and I was not allowed home for the funeral.

I wanted to be with her when she died. I wanted to be there when she was buried, too. Several months later I visited her grave, alone, and threw myself on top, wanting to lie there, in the ground, with her.

If someone could have put her out of her pain prematurely, would I have wanted that? I wanted my mum to live as long as possible. I wanted my mum to see the caring, compassionate young man I would grow up to be, who became a journalist — that would have made her proud.

But she never once asked for anyone to end it all for her. As she said herself: "I don't want to die, I don't want to die", even in the depths of despair and pain.

Everyone is different, everyone

wants different things and individual wishes should be respected, in my view. I state for the record that I would want treatment withdrawn if it were judged by those of competency that I would not recover anyway, or, if I did, that the quality of my life would be so impaired as to make it a living hell for me and those who love me.

Whether I would want them to commit a deliberate act of administering an overdose, I am not sure. I would not want them to do anything that would get them into legal trouble and I certainly would not want to be smothered with a pillow.

The vet put my old dog, and best pal, Dawn, to sleep four years ago. Her sight had gradually deteriorated to near-blindness, she had heart disease which we had treated for many years, she had had a stroke, she was incontinent and it was obvious in which direction she was heading.

We did her a kindness. She might have lived a few more months but we spared her the very worst kind of suffering. We buried her in a pet cemetery and held a funeral service. Well, she was family.

I have often thought it peculiar that we do animals this kindness yet when it comes to people they are left to linger even when their condition is beyond hope. The perverse thing is that we do animals this kindness because humanity does not hold their lives to be as valuable.

So yes, I am for euthanasia — I certainly would not want anyone to be prosecuted who ended a life for all the "right" reasons.

But although I have often thought I wished my mum could have had an early let-out from her pain, no, I would not have wanted her life ended even more prematurely than it ended anyway. She was my mum for such a short time.

And I have seen remarkable recoveries when all hope was gone.

No one wants to be left wondering, what if...?