**Interview with Natasha Klassen**

**Maria:** [00:00:00] What if your biggest fear actually happened? And the one thing you dreaded came true? What would you do and how would you cope? I'm Maria Dyck and welcome to Mennonite Girls in a Modern World. I'm here talking today with my friend, Natasha Klassen. I met Natasha when she was a young girl and her family moved to Blue Creek, Belize where I was living.

[00:00:26] Although I shouldn't say you were a young girl, cause you were a teen, but how, I don't even know how old you were. Natasha. How old were you?

[00:00:31] **Natasha:** [00:00:31] I was thir... Uh, no 14.

[00:00:34] **Maria:** [00:00:34] Yeah, definitely a teen then. And I knew a little bit of your story back then, but you know, I didn't know, and of course neither could you ever have imagined, that one day your past would collide with your future in a way you would have never imagined. And so welcome to the show, Natasha. I'm just really excited to have you here today.

[00:00:54]**Natasha:** [00:00:54] Thank you. I'm so honored to be here. I'm excited to share my story and do some catching up!

[00:01:00]**Maria:** [00:01:00] And we're very thankful for your husband, Richard, who's holding down the fort because I know you had to tuck in your little ones for the night before you could join us on the show here. So, you know, I remember those days, three little ones will keep you very, very busy.

[00:01:13] **Natasha:** [00:01:13] Very busy. Yep.

[00:01:15]**Maria:** [00:01:15] I know your life is busy as a mom, but I do remember you best as a young teen who had moved to Belize. And I think that was your piano teacher for a while, too, right?

[00:01:26]**Natasha:** [00:01:26] Yes, you were. Yeah. And you were, I also think at some point you were a mentor of some kind through a youth, something, I don't remember what exactly it was, but.

[00:01:37] **Maria:** [00:01:37] I don't remember quite exactly either, but we did have a good time that I remember.

[00:01:42] **Natasha:** [00:01:42] Yes. That I also remember.

[00:01:45] **Maria:** [00:01:45] Blue Creek is also where you met your husband, Richard, which is where also I met my husband. But before we get into meeting Richard and that, I think it's important for us to go a little bit further back and, and tell us about your early childhood and your story with your dad and his journey with cancer.

[00:02:05] **Natasha:** [00:02:05] Absolutely. So I don't remember my dad; I was 10 months old when he died. My mom was seven months pregnant when he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. And, he passed away shortly before I turned one, and I am lucky enough that my mom got remarried and was able to give me a dad later in life.

[00:02:27] I was almost three when she got remarried. So it's not that I didn't grow up with a dad. It was just not my biological dad. And I... I don't remember a lot about, obviously not having him in our lives just cause I was really young, and I have a few vague memories of it being just me and my mom. And I don't know if there's so many memories as just like it's been in conversation and I remember conversations about it.

[00:02:57] **Maria:** [00:02:57] Right.

[00:02:57]**Natasha:** [00:02:57] But when I was about eight, I remember going through like the stages of grief, of not knowing who my biological dad was and kind of questioning how my life would have been different if he was still alive. And not because my life was bad, like my life was fantastic. My dad is great. But I think when we don't know what the....it's always that questioning of the unknown. Right?

[00:03:25]**Maria:** [00:03:25] Right. Yes.

[00:03:27]**Natasha:** [00:03:27] I just remember always kind of being scared of cancer, and I think lots of people are, but I was maybe scared of it a little bit differently than other people were just because of the experience of losing my dad.

[00:03:42] **Maria:** [00:03:42] I think what can happen so often is you have this trauma, and I think what people often forget is: they assume that young children won't remember. If you don't remember the trauma, then it doesn't affect you. People are starting to understand now how much though, that kind of trauma goes into our bodies, and even if our minds can not remember, there's something about it that changes us. And it affects us really, really deeply. Like, so for you, to now grieve at the age of eight, it was like, it finally caught up with you.

[00:04:13] And people would have said, "Well, what you can't remember, so what does it, how would it have affected you?" But these things really do. And sometimes we misunderstand that, so that's a really, really good point to remember.

[00:04:26] **Natasha:** [00:04:26] My mom was great with always bringing me down and like calming me and figuring out how, how she could help me grieve. My mom is a very empathetic person, and she did great just being able to help me process that grief and figure it out.

[00:04:42] **Maria:** [00:04:42] And that must've been so incredibly hard for her though, as well to be a young mom and a young widow.

[00:04:49]**Natasha:** [00:04:49] Yeah. I cannot imagine like she was married at 18 and had me at 20.

[00:04:54] So by the time she was 21, I guess, she was a widow already with a 10 month old baby, I just can't even imagine how that would have felt.

[00:05:04] **Maria:** [00:05:04] And so I know that you, you were loved and you were cared for, but you've kind of carried that little bit with you, and then you moved to Blue Creek and you meet your future husband. And I'll just let you take on the story from there.

[00:05:18]**Natasha:** [00:05:18] Yeah, sure. Yeah. So we met. We were friends, we went to youth together, and just got to know each other-started dating. I was a young or, sorry, not a young teenager. I mean, I was a young teenager, but I was 17 when we started dating and got married just before I turned 20, so I was also really young when we got married. I guess we moved to Manitoba when I graduated from high school. We moved back as a family and then Richard followed a year later.

[00:05:49] So we spent a year kind of doing that long distance relationship. It was terrible. But we made it work, and he ended up coming up to Manitoba as well, and we got married in 2009. Actually on Saturday is our 12th anniversary.

[00:06:07]**Maria:** [00:06:07] Okay. Yeah. Time flies. Wow.

[00:06:09]**Natasha:** [00:06:09] So yeah, I got married and then in 2012, or I guess in 2011, we got pregnant with our first child, and I was seven months pregnant and he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

[00:06:27]**Maria:** [00:06:27] The same cancer that your dad had?

[00:06:30]**Natasha:** [00:06:30] My Dad's was non-Hodgkin's and Richard's was Hodgkin's, but other than that, yeah, it was all the same.

[00:06:37] **Maria:** [00:06:37] Hmm. So when you were pregnant with your first child?

[00:06:40]**Natasha:** [00:06:40] Yeah. Also seven months pregnant, which my mom had also been, there were so many weird coincidences and correlations between our story, and the story that my mom and dad had just lived.

[00:06:52]Yeah, so my mom and I were both seven months pregnant when our husbands were diagnosed; they were both diagnosed with lymphoma. I don't know. I... I feel like I've maybe have blocked some of those coincidences out, but there was so many things that was like - oh my word- we are reliving exactly what my mom and dad lived, however, 25 years earlier.

[00:07:16] **Maria:** [00:07:16] You think about that just for a moment. And I think about that from your perspective, you've lost a dad and now your husband's facing this, basically the same kind of cancer. But I'm also trying to envision it from your mom's point of view, how she'd already lost one husband and now to watch her daughter go through that, like, I think that would have been so incredibly difficult.

[00:07:39] What were some of those early emotions or prayers? Like what, what was running through your mind right at the beginning?

[00:07:48]**Natasha:** [00:07:48] Well, we were both super overwhelmed by everything that was going on. He'd been sick for a couple months and just with this, like never ending cough, it was just always there. And he didn't have a family doctor because there was no doctors in our town that were accepting patients at the time. The whole story that is part of our Canadian health care system.

[00:08:13] And finally, he found a doctor, or he saw a doctor twice in the walk-in, who was like, "This should be gone. I'm taking you on as a patient that we can figure this out," which was really nice. So like once we got the diagnosis, I just remember being so overwhelmed by what was all happening. And then like the, the immediate, next thought was, "Have we done something wrong?"

[00:08:41] Like, is this because of something that we did? Is this a sin? Like what, like, or is it the result of a sin or like, what is the reason?

[00:08:50] **Maria:** [00:08:50] What did I do to deserve this?

[00:08:52]**Natasha:** [00:08:52] Exactly. And I think as humans, we want a reason for everything. We don't want things to just happen just because they happen. Like my dad.

[00:09:02] And my parents and my grandparents, and I had some aunts and uncles and cousins. I remember being at my grandparents in the backyard, and we prayed over Richard, and we anointed him with oil. And we did all the things that could possibly bring him physical healing without having to do the treatments and the sickness and all the things that were not going to be fun about this journey.

[00:09:29] **Maria:** [00:09:29] Right.

[00:09:29]**Natasha:** [00:09:29] And at that point God's answer was just no. And so we decided to just buckle down, and we decided that we would do the treatments. We had really good, like very high chances of success with chemotherapy. So, even like he had stage four cancer and even then, it was like a 75 to 80% chance that he was going to live if he did the chemo. So that just made sense to us at the time.

[00:09:57] And even now, like if we would have to redo that we would still do the same thing I think. And, yeah, so we put our faith in God and in the medical system and it was, it was crazy. I don't actually remember feeling a lot of emotions at the beginning.

[00:10:16] I think I kind of just like blocked it and blocked the emotions and went into fight mode. And it was like, "Okay, well, this is what we have to do. So this is what we're going to do."

[00:10:27] **Maria:** [00:10:27] Right. And that can be a gift from God that a part of you is able to shut that down because that's not going to help you right then, and you had so much to think about.

[00:10:37] **Natasha:** [00:10:37] Yeah. So, and then he started chemo the same day our daughter was born. So we were both in separate hospitals. I had been at home trying to get ready like I was 16 days out from my due date, so I thought I still had lots of time.

[00:10:54] I was expecting to go like, you know, 10 days overdue, but I had a month of pregnancy left. I had been at home waiting for a doctor's appointment. I was going to go back into the city to be with him that next day for his first round of chemo.

[00:11:09] And then I was going to do some shopping because we had this baby coming that we literally had a crib and a box still for, and that was about it. So I was getting ready to go out and, we had two dogs at the time, so I was going to drop them off and get into the city and just be there for a couple of days.

[00:11:32] And my water broke. And I was like, as I'm standing there thinking like, "What is happening right now?" Right. I was like, "Well, I'll just, I'll just go to the hospital and we'll figure it out." Not really thinking about the fact that if my water was broken, I was not leaving the hospital if I went in.

[00:11:53] **Maria:** [00:11:53] Yeah. They're not going to let you go anywhere else.

[00:11:55] **Natasha:** [00:11:55] No. Then I was stuck there. So I was in Portage where we were living, and he was in Winnipeg at a hospital there. And so his brother went to go be with him, thankfully, that was a huge blessing for me. I was so scared of him being by himself for that first treatment.

[00:12:13] We just fought to get him to Portage, and he ended up there and 45 minutes later, our daughter was born.

[00:12:21] **Maria:** [00:12:21] Oh, wow. Oh my,

[00:12:25]**Natasha:** [00:12:25] It was crazy. So I went in in the morning, and then by later in the evening, when we finally had her. Although, I'm glad it wasn't earlier than they have been able to drive out and,

[00:12:37] **Maria:** [00:12:37] ...and he made it...

[00:12:39] **Natasha:** [00:12:39] And he made it. Yeah, he was there. I don't know if he even remembers being there really, but he was there.

[00:12:46] **Maria:** [00:12:46] So how long did he need to have treatment for?

[00:12:49] **Natasha:** [00:12:49] So he had treatment...he started in July and he was done, I believe, at the beginning of January , and it was every other Wednesday. So it was not - he always felt pretty good like that second week -but that first week was always horrible. And then for the first 72 hours, after he would get chemo, he was toxic.

[00:13:13] **Maria:** [00:13:13] Okay.

[00:13:13] **Natasha:** [00:13:13] So all of his body fluid could cause rash and, just reactions towards me or Kylie if we touched him. So like he slept in a separate bed. He had to make sure that he always flushed and wiped around the toilet. It was crazy. They were pumping a lot of really nasty stuff into his body.

[00:13:33] **Maria:** [00:13:33] Right.

[00:13:34] **Natasha:** [00:13:34] And because of his age, he was young and strong, they could do really strong treatments. Sometimes they would stop and call the oncologist or like before they would even start his treatments, they would call the oncologist and be like, "You're sure this is the treatment that we're supposed to be giving him?" And she would say, "Yep!" Because they just had never seen treatment that strong and big.

[00:13:58]**Maria:** [00:13:58] Wow. They had a lot of faith that it would work then?

[00:14:01]**Natasha:** [00:14:01] Yeah, they did. And, and that his body could handle that. So those, but those 72 hours after treatment was just long and hard, and Kylie was always so grumpy those 72 hours, like she I guess, I guess could just sense the stress of us doing what we were doing.

[00:14:24] **Maria:** [00:14:24] Well, absolutely. Can you imagine? No, I can't imagine actually. What, like, how did you cope in those days? How did you stay sane?

[00:14:34] **Natasha:** [00:14:34] I don't know.

[00:14:37] **Maria:** [00:14:37] Fair enough.

[00:14:38] **Natasha:** [00:14:38] Richard's mom came. Richard's mom came up from Belize, and she was out for about a month, the first month of Kylie's life and dealing with all of, all of this stuff that we were doing, and that was a huge help.

[00:14:51] So she would either help with Kylie or she would make food or whatever it was that we needed. That's what she would do. My sisters were angels. They would come out as often as they could and be fantastic aunties and just help with, with Kylie and with, mostly with Kylie, because that's what you want to do when it's your first niece,

[00:15:18] **Maria:** [00:15:18] Right? Yes. That was the fun job, obviously. And it's helpful anyways,

[00:15:21]**Natasha:** [00:15:21] So helpful. So, and a lot of prayer-oh my goodness. Like I remember when Kylie and I would be up in the middle of the night, when I would be feeding her, and I remember doing lots of praying, lots of crying, and lots of singing and worship music. And the song, actually the song, "10,000 Reasons" had just come out that year, and I think that was our Anthem for that year was just find that the 10,000 reasons that we can to praise God's name because there's still lots of good.

[00:16:00] **Maria:** [00:16:00] Yes. Even sometimes when you feel like you're scratching really hard around to look for it.

[00:16:06] **Natasha:** [00:16:06] Yeah. And Kylie was like just the hugest blessing that we didn't know we needed for 2012. She was our little ray of sunshine in this really dark time, and looking back her conception story is a little bit crazy too, and I think that when I look back on it, I'm like, "Wow! That was all God." Because there was no way...our plan was not yet to have children, so... He was like, "No, you're going to need this." Yeah, exactly. So yeah, when I look back and like, yeah, that definitely was not us and all God.

[00:16:45]**Maria:** [00:16:45] Was there ever a time where you wrestled through this whole idea that why would God answer your prayers and restore Richard's health when He didn't restore your dad's?

[00:16:57] **Natasha:** [00:16:57] I think for myself, I didn't think that way . I think I maybe thought that more actually after when he was cancer-free, and it was like, "Why, why is this the end to our story, but not the end to my mom's story?"

[00:17:13] I do think, like, I know, my mom and I are very close, and so I would call her, and I would word vomit all over her. And I was so emotional, and sometimes now I feel a little bit guilty because I'm like, wow, she must have been dealing with so many emotions of her own, and then I was like, piling mine on top of that. So, now I feel a little bit guilty about that sometimes, and not guilty like I wish I hadn't done it because I needed her, but guilty in that, I was like, "Yeah, sorry, mom, I shouldn't....I I should have thought about what you were also going through." But at the time I just didn't have the capacity to even think about what she was going through.

[00:17:58] **Maria:** [00:17:58] Well, but now you're a mom too so now you would understand why a mom would do that for their child. Right? Like if your daughter needed you that way, even if it hurts, you do it because something in us just wants to do that for our children. So, but yeah, I can imagine that it's really, you have to really wrestle through those issues of God's goodness and sovereignty when He answers some prayers and not others. And it has nothing to do with who He loves more like that's, that's not the point, right?

[00:18:29] **Natasha:** [00:18:29] Yeah. And one of the things that we were always very well, one of the things we wanted to make very aware to people who were praying for us was that because Richard had a faith in Jesus, even if he died, he was going to be healed.

[00:18:45] **Maria:** [00:18:45] Hmm. Yes.

[00:18:48] **Natasha:** [00:18:48] Because. Heaven is the ultimate healing, right? Like, and so one of like, that was something that we really wanted to make clear that we understood, and we wanted other people to understand too, that even if he died, which we really hoped, he didn't, he was still going to be healed and whole,

[00:19:08] **Maria:** [00:19:08] I love that. I feel like it was last year sometime, I came across this video on YouTube where, Tony Evans' wife passed away, and his son was giving the eulogy at the funeral. And this is what he said about his mom who had been sick.

[00:19:22]He said, " Either she was going to go home, or she was going to go home. Either she was going to be with loved ones, or she was going to be with loved ones. And either she was going to be healed, or she was going to be healed." Because for the Christian, it goes both ways. And that is just this incredible inheritance we have as a child of God. And that has stuck with me...like you win either way.

[00:19:49]**Natasha:** [00:19:49] Yeah, exactly, exactly. It wasn't that we actually would, I mean, I wanted him here with us, obviously. I didn't want to raise Kylie by myself and...and, you know, the discussions that we had to have while he was sick about like, what happens *if.* I mean, those are important discussions to have, but there there's a new light shed on them when the reality is that the person you love is really sick, and this actually could happen where I'm going to need to decide, what I'm going to do, and where I'm going to live, and if I ever want to get married again someday, or all these things. And it was, it was a lot to think about. And I think I got overwhelmed and anxious when I would start thinking like too far into the future.

[00:20:39] So we did a lot of being very present, and *we will think about today* and *we will fight for today*. And then we will do it again tomorrow. But it will always just be for today because if we went too far into the future, I think maybe for both of us, it was like, this is too scary and overwhelming.

[00:20:58] **Maria:** [00:20:58] Absolutely. That's so wise though, too, you know, when you look back-and so what are we going on-to what about eight years that he has been in remission? Is that about close?

[00:21:11]**Natasha:** [00:21:11] Yep!

[00:21:12]**Maria:** [00:21:12] And when you look back at this time that has passed and, and you've had two more children, and your family is growing, you know, when you now look back on that time in your life, what do you remember the most?

[00:21:24] What just really sticks with you?

[00:21:26]**Natasha:** [00:21:26] I think it's interesting for me to look back and think that even in all of that, that's probably the time when I felt the closest to God that I've ever felt. In the midst of chaos and darkness and grief , we never stopped believing that God was good, and He had a good plan for us.

[00:21:47] And that, I...I think I learned something about God in that time, in the sense that God is okay with me being angry at him and yelling at him and questioning him, and He will still love me. It doesn't matter. He just wants me.

[00:22:07]**Maria:** [00:22:07] Yes.

[00:22:08]**Natasha:** [00:22:08] And I think that was like the biggest faith lesson that I had in that time. And when I look back, sometimes I feel like it was maybe a dream, but it wasn't.

[00:22:19] **Maria:** [00:22:19] Right.

[00:22:19]**Natasha:** [00:22:19] And yeah, I think just the fact that we were able to just look back and find joy and peace throughout all of that was miraculous in itself.

[00:22:31]**Maria:** [00:22:31] And in a way, maybe if you even look at it, it was, you can look at your mom's story as a way that it prepared you for what was coming ahead.

[00:22:40] To some extent you do wonder how God used her story to prepare yours.

[00:22:45]**Natasha:** [00:22:45] Right.

[00:22:47] **Maria:** [00:22:47] And just think about that. It blows your mind.

[00:22:49]**Natasha:** [00:22:49] I know we've talked about it too with my mom and my parents, and how I think all of us, because my grandma would have walked this same journey with my mom, like 25 years earlier.

[00:23:03]And so I think for her, it was also ... like it was devastating all around. It wasn't, it didn't just affect us and my family, like my immediate family, it also affected the grandparents and the aunts and uncles, and the people that, walked that journey already with my mom.

[00:23:20] And I think that when we just see how God redeemed, maybe even some of the misbeliefs that they had now regarding the situation with my mom and dad, and God just came in and was like, "No, I'm still bigger than this is."

[00:23:38] **Maria:** [00:23:38] And restored some hope...

[00:23:39] **Natasha:** [00:23:39] Yeah, exactly. And we were really close. So I have an aunt and uncle that- my uncle was my dad's brother, and then my aunt is my mom's sister. So they're a double aunt and uncle. And Richard and my uncle were really close, and they did like lots of hunting and fishing and outdoor things, and we got together with them all the time. And so I remember the first Sunday we were in church after he was diagnosed, they sang the doxology.

[00:24:12]And we were sitting in the back row, and there was no way I could sing that song. Like I was sobbing, sobbing in the back row of church, and my uncle was sitting with us and I remember him leaving because he just couldn't handle like, he's like, "No, right now I don't praise God. I can't. I don't know how,"

[00:24:36] I don't remember how Richard was feeling. He probably doesn't even remember himself, so that first Sunday, when they sang the doxology and I was like, *I don't know if right now I can sing this song*. I mean, I physically couldn't, but I didn't even know if I spiritually could. And the Sunday after he was pronounced cancer-free, they sang it again.

[00:25:00] **Maria:** [00:25:00] Oh, wow. Like bookends.

[00:25:03] **Natasha:** [00:25:03] And, and it was like the complete opposite reaction. And I could look back now and see where I still had been praising God in like the littlest things maybe, but there was still so much to praise him for.

[00:25:22]**Maria:** [00:25:22] I love that. And I, I love that *that* is what framed his whole cancer journey is this song.

[00:25:29]Everyone goes through their own hard times, and it's not always cancer, although that does seem to be a lot of times the journey people - the journey *chooses them-* it's not something they get to choose. And yet, you know, to know that God's goodness is there and what, a way for God, to maybe just restore some hope into a family that, the first time had felt so much loss, and now God had restored that hope.

[00:25:51] I think that that's, that's a huge answer to prayer for so many. And for you, I'm just so thankful too, that Richard was restored to health and you've been able to carry on and build this life with your beautiful kids and yeah, and that you have this testimony, and you know, I just know that that is something that is just going to touch a lot of people when you share that, so I just want to thank you again so much for coming on here and sharing it because I know sometimes going back and rethinking and reliving, that can be a little bit emotional. So thanks for doing that, Natasha.

[00:26:27] **Natasha:** [00:26:27] Yeah, no problem. Thank you so much for having me.