A man’s life, and that of his family, is transformed upon diagnosis of a rare and aggressive Leukaemia. Less than two months from his Ph.D. submission and amidst the quest for a second child, a young couple struggle to raise a 2-year-old throughout an aggressive treatment protocol.

The search for a bone marrow donor forces a family revelation. Peter, whose life was taken at 33 and who stimulates few memories in the man, is not the man’s biological father. The father is alive. The man questions the meaning of fatherhood as he attempts to remember Peter; explores his relationship with his step-father; searches for and begins a relationship with his new-found father; and tries to survive long enough for his daughter to remember him.

A bone marrow donor cannot be found, neither from within his family nor the 19 million registered donors. The setback brings with it a new prognosis – a twenty-one percent chance of surviving two years.

The man completes six months of chemotherapy. He submits his Ph.D. and returns to the Federal Government where he leads the earthquake risk program. The couple resume IVF and fall pregnant. They lose the baby – they continue trying. Meanwhile, looming over them is an ever-present likelihood of relapse and probable death.

Relapse occurs after 1.5 years. Seven days chemotherapy unleashes a life-threatening septicemia; pneumonia; chronic diarrhoea; and a fungal infection requiring partial removal of both lungs. The man breaks – he wants no more treatment – his wife refuses, convincing him to fight on. He is discharged after six months hospitalisation. Likelihood of further relapse remains high.

Medical advances present new hope, the potential for long-term survival via transplant from a half matched sibling, a procedure impossible one year earlier. The couple moves to Sydney, interrupting their daughter’s first year at school. The man receives a transplant. He experiences a month of raging fevers and partial paralysis – he is unable to walk or swallow. A feeding tube is inserted and the bed-ridden man transferred to a high dependency ward. Can the family endure more hardship? Will the man regain enough strength to be a good father?

Twenty-one percent is the story of an every day family in suburban Canberra whose hopes and dreams fall apart due to cancer, family deceit, life threating complications and ongoing uncertainty. Will this family ever be the same again?