

One more day

Father's death in explosion changes his daughter's world by Shannon Kempton



One of the first memories I have with my dad is the trips with him to visit my grandparents every weekend. I can remember my mom getting ready on Friday afternoon and packing us in the car to pick dad up from work and make the two hour drive to our grandparents' house. We loved going there and there were so many fond memories made at that old farmhouse. Every spring he would take my sister and me for a drive in the woods to pick lady slippers. On the way back from these excursions he would pull off the main road into an old field where a road used to be

and take us through that path where the tree branches had grown across so that they were beating off the old truck. My sister and I would laugh uncontrollably and dad would just smile at us and drive home.

Dad was a jokester. He was always smiling or trying to make someone smile. I remember being a teenager and inviting my friends over. Dad always had a nickname for them. I would come home from school and if dad was home I would try to sneak away to my room with whomever I had invited over before dad "caught us" and picked on them.

The other thing that I remember about

my dad was his hands. Dad's hands were always dirty from working on cars. Dad worked as an auto mechanic all his life. Although he dropped out of school in Grade 9 he went on to trade school and received his mechanic's license. When my sister and I came along his life revolved around us. Dad was home every night to have supper with us and tuck us into bed. Not once growing up were my sister or I looked after by a babysitter. Not even for a couple of hours.

When my sister and I turned 16 and wanted to get our driver's licenses dad told us that we could only drive when we knew how to pump gas, change a tire and check the oil in the car. Dad didn't want either of us to ever be stranded on the side of the road. Needless to say he was less than happy with me when I blew the engine in his car because I forgot to check the oil. Nor was he very thrilled the time he had to walk halfway home from work because I didn't put gas in the car.

Dad's home was always my home too. Even after I moved out and bought my own house, dad's house was the place I could go when I needed to get away from things. I always said that dad's was the place I could go when I had nowhere else to go. No matter how many times I moved away the door was always open for me to come back in if I needed to.

That door was shut for me on September 20, 2013. I can remember that day as if it were yesterday. It was a beautiful fall day and it had that smell in the air that you often smell when the leaves are changing and the temperatures are starting to get cooler. I was working that day but decided to sneak out early so I could pack up for a trip to the cabin that weekend. I had just gotten home and I was inside doing some packing.

When my cell phone rang I looked at it and didn't recognize the number. I don't typically answer calls if I don't know who they are but for some reason that day I decided to answer it. The voice on the other end was a woman's voice I hadn't heard before. She told me her name and that she was a friend of my dad's and was calling because my dad had been in an accident at work and he was taken to the hospital. At first I didn't panic because he often took cars for test drives so I thought that maybe

he was in a car accident. I mean if it was really that bad wouldn't the RCMP or hospital be trying to reach me? I called the hospital and told them who I was and they immediately put one of the plastic surgeons on the phone with me. He informed me that dad had been involved in an explosion at work and he was burned pretty badly. He asked if I would be able to come into the hospital and when I could get there.

The drive to the hospital was excruciating. I live an hour from the hospital on a good day but that day there was construction on the highway and traffic was at a standstill. While sitting waiting I started looking at my phone and saw an image on social media of smoke billowing into the air and details that there had been an explosion at a mechanic shop. I still didn't fully comprehend how bad the situation was. I thought that he might have burned his arms up a bit or his legs. I wasn't prepared for what I was about to hear. It wasn't until I saw that RCMP officer waiting for me at the doors of the ICU that I started to think that things weren't as good as I had thought. The officer told us that my dad had been working on a gas tank underneath a car parked outside the garage. Something was nicked and there had been an explosion while he was still beneath the vehicle. He told us that my dad had been badly burned and that the doctors were working on him then. Once he told us what had happened and got my contact information he called into the ICU. We were met at the doors by a social worker who took us to a private family room where a surgeon met with us. We were told by the doctor the full extent of his injuries and were informed that they were doing all that they could for my dad but things didn't look good. He had sustained burns to 95 per cent of his body and over half were third degree. The only part of him that had not suffered burns was the bottom of his legs and feet where he had been protected by his work boots.

The next few hours went by in a blur. Hospital staff were working as quickly as possible to dress the wounds that my father sustained so that my sister and I could go see him. Other staff members were taking me in to fill out paperwork for what I'm sure they knew was to come. Family from away was called to come as was my dad's best friend. We waited at the hospital for two and a half hours before the doctors finally said that we could go in and see him. The social worker did her best to describe to us what was happening and what to

expect when we were finally allowed to go in to the room but no one can prepare you for what we saw.

My dad, the person who I looked up to for all my life, the man who was invincible to me, was lying in a bed with tubes coming out of him everywhere, bandaged from head to toe and completely helpless. I tried to stay strong but was falling apart inside.

The night moved along with checks from the doctors on how he was doing. Family and friends moved in and out of the ICU. And my sister and I stayed there taking turns going in and sitting with him. The next morning the doctors called me in to a meeting where they told me that the machines were keeping my dad alive and it was probably time for me to make the decision to stop treatment. I can still remember thinking: how can they expect me to sign a paper saying that it was ok to let my father die? It was incomprehensible to me but in that moment I remember a conversation I had overheard when I was younger between my parents. My dad said that he never wanted to be kept alive by a machine. Somewhere I found the strength to do what I knew he would have wanted and dad passed away peacefully almost 24 hours after the explosion.

The company my father worked for was issued a stop work order immediately after the explosion and subsequently issued 24 compliance orders which included not having proper welding equipment and training on site. They were also issued a compliance order relating to lack of employee training.

On September 10, 2015, just 10 days

shy of the second anniversary of the explosion, the employer that my father worked for was charged with 12 Occupational Health and Safety charges. In addition, the owner was charged with criminal negligence causing death through Bill C-45, the Westray bill, a first in Nova Scotia. If convicted, he could face up to life in jail.

Not only did the explosion take my dad from me but it took away my sense of security and some of the innocence that I still had. I thought that my dad was invincible and he would always be there when I needed him but in one fateful moment he was torn away from me and things would never be the same again. I struggled with many regrets following my father's death, some of which I still struggle with today. No one ever thinks that someone's last day is going to be their last day. My dad was healthy and only 58. I thought I would have lots of time to do the things with him that I was putting off.

Two years have passed since that day and although my life continues, things are not the same, nor will they ever be. I often think that my life has been split into two lives: life before my dad died and life since my dad died. I don't trust as freely as I used to. I worry more. Worry about the people in my life being taken from me just as dad had been.

I wish for more time with my dad. One more day so that I can tell him that I love him. One more day so that I can take him to our cabin. One more day to just hang out like we used to do when I was a kid.



Peter with Shannon's sister