

CREATIVE WORKS

The gentle ask

“Do you have a son named Brad Howell?” I couldn’t identify the voice on the other end of the phone, I thought he said it was a Halifax Regional Police officer, but that couldn’t be. I confirmed that Brad was my son, a reservist with the Princess Louise Fusiliers.

The officer said there had been an accident at the Halifax Armouries. I was confused. How could there have been an accident at the armouries? He must mean a car crash, as Brad should be driving home right about now.

I was advised to come immediately to the hospital. I called to my other children, told them that Brad had been in an accident and I was going to the hospital. I reassured them that it was probably nothing, maybe a broken leg or something — something *fixable* — and I would call them as soon as I knew. It was 12:20 am.

I didn’t yet know that my son, my precious 18-year-old son, had just been pronounced dead.

The police were waiting for me in the parking lot at the infirmary. I thought that was unusual. An officer, clearly with tears in his eyes, took me into the hospital. He started walking me to the “family room.”

Oh no, my heart stopped — not the family room — this can’t be happening. I could not believe what my senses were trying to tell me. Soon a nurse came in and asked if I had been told what had happened. I told her I only knew there had been an accident.

She told me that Brad had been crushed between a forklift and a truck.

She had no word on his condition.

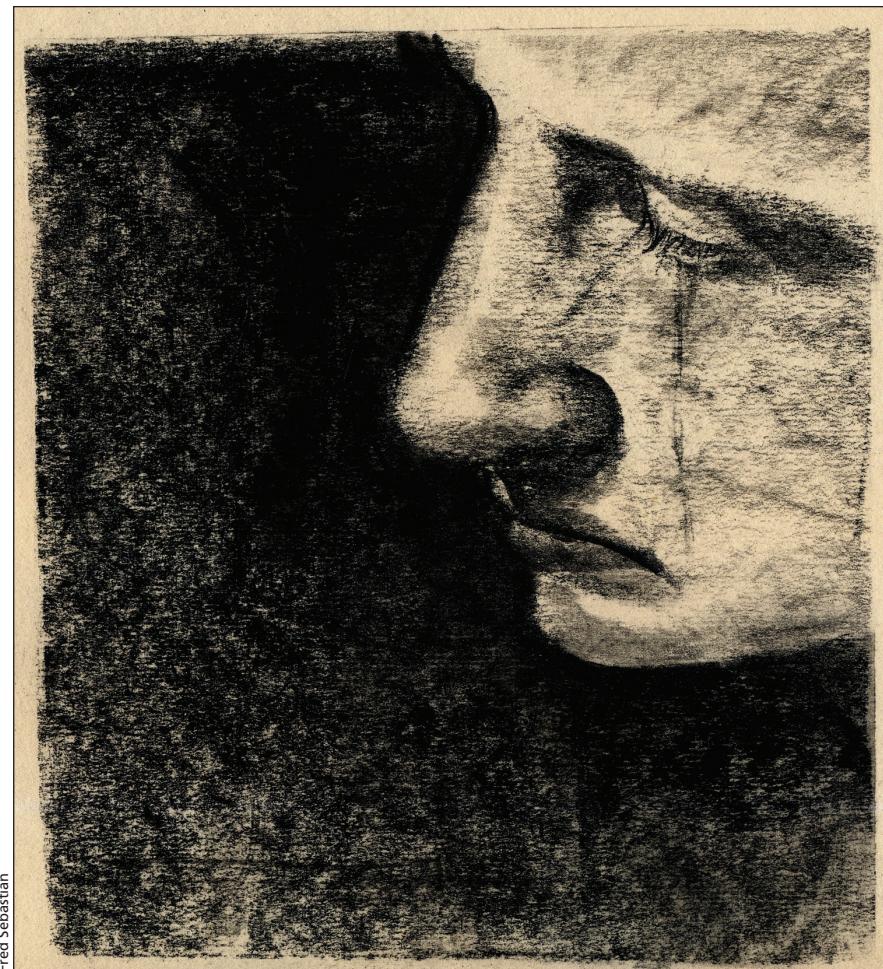
The doctor would be in to speak with me shortly.

My mouth went completely dry.

Crushed? Crushed?

Then I saw the priest. OH, NO, I thought. My God, please not the priest. Please God, please ... not my son ...

I don’t remember much after that.



Fred Sebastian

The doctor was very kind. He had nice shoes.

I remember the pattern of the floor tiles.

No parent is ever prepared for this. Life, as we had known it, was over; shattered into a million pieces. And the pieces will never fit together in the same way again.

It is at this point that physicians need to ask the family to consider tissue donation. How do you approach a mother who has just found out her beloved child is dead?

Don’t be afraid ... I am that mother.

And you might wonder how can anyone offer meaningful comfort.

You can. You can ask about donation. I challenge you to let go of your own discomfort and approach this family about donation. You may be concerned about intruding upon a shock

and grief of shattering proportions. I have just heard the worst news possible. You can’t make it any worse.

The decision to donate is the only decision that may have the power to comfort in the days ahead. It is something tangible, something to hold on to when searching for meaning in a meaningless and senseless event. It is the silent and heartfelt wish that another life may be lived — or more fully lived — through this gift, that another family may be spared grief. It is the gentle ask and it is a meaningful decision.

In the hours and days ahead, I had to make dozens of decisions; none of which I felt equipped to make, and never thought I would have to make.

Which funeral home?

What would you like him to wear?

Cremation or burial?

Which cemetery?
Who has to be notified?

The decisions were endless. The first question that should be asked, the first of those many decisions to make should be: Would your loved one have wanted to be a tissue donor?

Coincidentally, Brad and I had discussed donation shortly before his death. I asked him if he would want to be listed as a donor.

"Absolutely," he said, and gave me that easy smile of his. "Mom," he said, gesturing to his body, "this is only a rental."

I cannot describe the comfort of knowing that my son's eyes continue to see the world, although through a different lens. The games of rugby he so loved to play will continue with the gift of tendons into another athlete or weekend warrior. Heart valves will save the life of a child with a heart defect.

The gift of organ and tissue donation can give another dimension of meaning to a life too briefly lived: a newborn baby, a preschooler, a teenager. It gave my family comfort, and yes, the *gift* of a legacy for Brad's life, and a source of comfort to a grieving mother and a devastated family.

Brad gave so much in life and to life and I want him to be remembered. Not the tragedy that was his death, but the gift that was his life. Through the privilege of donation, it was a gift that we shared with others, when his heart could no longer beat.

Our lives were incredibly enriched by Brad's life and love. It is my belief that in the lives of those transplant recipients, as they go on to live and love, there is a legacy. And when they laugh, I'm sure there is an echo to Brad's spirit. And he is smiling.

Denice Klavano
Mother
Halifax, NS

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POEM

They were beautiful once

She collected her first scar as a child.
A careless uncle stepped on her pinky,
Pressing it into a permanent but gentle hook.
Scalding water and burning pans have
thickened skin, dulled nerves.
We screamed in the bathtub, feet on fire
Her hands swirling in lava, coaxing us.

Her joints are swelled, hard now.
The wedding solitaire
sleeps in its velvet crevice;
she took it off before it strangled her.
Its replacement, with clustered sapphires,
a spider's cataracts, shines dully
from caked ivory soap.

Now her thumbs hook the steering wheel.
The fingers hang
in involuntary curves,
scalloped and pink,
pointing rudely to the pedals
and feet that have forgotten
which way to push.

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