

“If you are going to be a monkey, then you might as well be a gorilla”.

Ransford Smith Jr. was nothing short of larger than life in my eyes. He used to tell me this as his way of saying he wanted to own a room when he went into one. He was charming, funny, intelligent, kind, and patient. Four long years have gone by and the pain still lingers, still makes me angry, still makes me cry, still makes me sad.

I met my Smitty as a paramedic when working at Hartford Hospital as a nurse in the Emergency Department. He made it a point to make sure that the triage nurse would give his patients to me so he could talk to me, though I did not know this at the time. He joked later that he chased me until I caught him. About one year into knowing him, he tested for West Haven Fire Department and was put on the waiting list. He did the physical in his work boots. They were black mid-calf work boots. He did stairs, ran, and dummy dragged in boots. I promptly forgot about him testing as we were busy with life and dating and children.

We were planning to go away to Daytona in February for NASCAR race. Yes, the avid black Nascar fan. We went every year. Though that year he got a call telling him he had the job at West Haven if he wanted it... But the academy started Monday... when we were supposed to leave. So, we cancelled our trip. He went to the academy. I was nervous for him and a little proud. I do not have anyone in my family who is a part of the fire service, so I had no idea what to expect.

He studied so hard in the academy. He trained harder. I went to family night. I watched the video that they show about line of duty death and I panicked. I was insistent that he leave the academy. We talked on the phone after I had left for probably another hour as I was crying insisting that the fire department was going to kill him. He kept telling me he was going to be ok. We talked about how the academy was training him. I cried myself to sleep.

After he started West Haven fire department things settled. I became more familiar with having a firefighter in my life and what that meant. We talked about funny things that happened. We joked. We stressed about the difficulties in rotating schedules at the time. He would occasionally make the comment that if he ever died of smoke inhalation it was because he kept asking for newer fire gear at work. I trusted his judgement to keep himself safe. When firefighters died in the news, I felt it. We talked about them and how he could learn as not to make same mistakes. We went to a fellow firefighter's funeral. It was somber. I thought, “God, I hope I don't ever have to listen to bagpipes anytime soon”.

Smitty complained of stomach pain for a few weeks the fall of 2015. The pain worsened to the point I took him to Middlesex where I work. We stayed overnight. He had a cat scan. He followed up with the gastroenterologist. We were told everything was ok. The following spring in 2016, he began to complain of the same pain again. I told him to follow up with GI again... and to take Pepcid. He said he didn't want to take Pepcid unless the doctor told him to, and he made an appointment. You know... the back and forth of “I don't want to do what she is telling me because I'm stubborn 😊 “

He had his appointment. They scheduled an upper endoscopy to look into his esophagus and stomach. And they told him to take Pepcid. We may have had a vague "I told you so" look moment.

Smitty was 45 years old when he had his upper endoscopy, and they took biopsies of area they "didn't like". He was not a smoker. He was a firefighter who was active. He would have hung the moon if I asked him to. He adored our blended family. He had pictures of all the kids and me in his fire helmet. He loved being a firefighter.

I was in the shower when he came in and told me the news. I knew he had a follow-up, but I was working that night and he was in fire classes earlier in the day. I figured he could update me when he got home.

I actually had to put my head out because I didn't understand what he said.

"Cancer?" "What??"

Your entire world crashes in slow motion.

You lose direction. You are set adrift. In a single moment.

Stage 4 Gastric Cancer with metastasis to the liver and bone.

The next two months and twelve days were the most heart wrenching experience. I watched the man I love waste away, forget things, struggle, and try to cope with his impending death. The pain was horrible. The bone metastasis to his spine and femurs was unbearable but he did his best to hide it from the kids. I was floundering to take over the finances, take care of my dying husband, and try to prepare my children for the imminent loss of dad which likely was going to happen before Christmas. We put up the tree on Thanksgiving. We made cookies. I was trying anything to create any last memories. I would cry myself to sleep.

I remember one of Smitty's admissions. I was fighting for some things to make his life better. I was sitting at the bedside while he napped and on my laptop. I decided to research firefighters and cancer. Well once I went down research trail, I got more and more upset. I did not know the risks that were involved with firefighters and cancer. I was so very angry that day.

His sense of humor would peak through even while sick. For example, giving the occupational therapist a hard time about having a sip of Coca-Cola when he technically was nothing by mouth because he had stomach pain from cancer. But honestly his rational was he was dying of cancer what was the harm? He did his best to keep me on my toes.

The day we went back into the hospital for that last time he was so weak and confused. He had so much pain. He moved to hospice 2 days later.

I thought he was going to die that night. So did his nurse.

I felt like I was dying too. I now know why I get called for the families complaining of chest pain sitting at their dying loved one's bedside.

He held on 4 more days. Virtually unresponsive to verbal. He was in so much agony though. Whenever the nurses had to do anything with him, he was sweating from the pain. The nurses were doing everything they could to keep him comfortable.

We talked about him dying alone that when he first was diagnosed. I joked he was going to wait until I had gone home. He did. It was the first night I had actually gone home to sleep a few hours. I was about to come back to the hospital when they called. I knew before I picked up the phone.

Standing at the funeral of your husband feels like standing at ground zero after an earthquake. You recognize nothing, have no idea what to do, and no idea where to go. I held it together until they handed me the folded flag. That was the part I dreaded the most. The folded flag signaled the funeral was over, done, finished.

Real. Very very real.

Now my life has been changed. Drastically.

I have lost a lot of things. Money has been a challenge even working full time. I have struggled at times to put food on the table for my children.

Forty-five-year-old healthy nonsmoking firefighters aren't supposed to die of stage four stomach cancer and leave you.

I have spent years rebuilding some version of a new normal.

Navigating grief and its challenges. Sometimes I know triggers are coming. Birthdays. Holidays. Graduation. Sometimes I don't. A song. A memory. A question. A driving lesson. We lost not only our husband and father but a lifetime more of memories.

Even now I still will occasionally pause at even the smallest things--
like marital status: check one
Single. Married. Divorced.

Widowed

Pass S.B. No 141 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKERS' COMPENSATION COVERAGE FOR CURRENT AND FORMER MEMBERS OF PAID MUNICIPAL OR VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS.

Please, if you can ease another family's journey, do it. Please give another family the help I needed then and still could use now. Losing the one you love changes everything.

I was proud to be a firefighter's wife. He gave his life for his passion of helping people.

Reward other firefighters who put the same care, compassion, and dedication into their profession. Take care of them and take care of the ones they love.

