

Will

The rain was coming down in sheets as my windshield wipers struggled to keep the glass in front of me clear. It was a long two hour drive to the airport, and I didn't want to be late. I couldn't be late.

I'd answered the phone about an hour ago to hear my sister's voice. She was crying. Our father had taken a turn for the worse, and she thought that maybe I should come home.

She'd given him the phone so he could talk to me. But all he could get out was one word. "Will ...". My sister explained that he was too weak to talk any more ... but I should get home as quickly as I could.

My father is the only person who has ever called me 'Will'. I don't remember when that started, but he's always called me that. It made us closer, somehow. Hearing it now nearly broke my heart.

My sister explained to me that he was having heart problems. At ninety years old, my father was remarkably healthy otherwise. He'd had bad knees for years, and was pretty frail, but his mind was as agile as it had ever been.

My wife had hurriedly made the flight arrangements, and I'd set off for the airport in the pouring rain. I couldn't miss this flight.

My father and mother had raised their two sons and daughter in a small, safe town, where he held a good job. We always knew we were loved. We also knew that it was expected that we would all go to university, and we didn't let them down.

I became a teacher, my brother, after getting a degree in Political Science, joined the RCMP, and my sister earned a degree in physiotherapy, found it boring, and went back for three more years to become a family physician.

My parents were so proud of us.

But I'd moved to Alberta after teaching for a few years in Ontario, and it was hard, only getting to see everyone in the summer.

After my mother died, my father moved to an apartment in the small town where my sister worked, and enjoyed the next decade or two being a grandfather. My sister and brother's kids got to see him regularly, but my own two girls only got to see him in the summers. But they got to know their grandpa, something I'd missed out on as a kid.

As I pulled into the airport parking lot, I was happy to discover that I was a few minutes early. But when I checked in at the counter, I discovered a problem. My flight had no pilot, and there would be a delay, possibly of up to two hours.

I'd been three hours getting ready and driving here. The additional two hours, and the four hour flight, would mean it would be nine hours since I'd heard that single word from my father. I hoped I would get there in time to talk to him some more. Or at least say good-bye.

My father was a very stubborn man. In the last ten years of his life, he'd had increasing problems with his legs. He could get around, and he still drove, but he was pretty shaky. But he wouldn't ask for help.

Eventually his driving began to worry us so much that we convinced him to give up his car. This was very hard on him; he felt trapped in his apartment, and didn't like calling on my sister or brother to drive him places. But they came anyway.

In the last year, my father had grown weaker. He fell down a lot. Did I mention he was stubborn? My sister obtained an alert bracelet for him, one that would summon her if he had troubles when alone in his apartment. But he wouldn't use it ... he didn't want to inconvenience her while she was at work. Once, he fell down while getting out of bed, and lay on the floor for most of the day, too weak to get up. He wouldn't push the button. That was my father. I loved him anyway.

Eventually they found a pilot for my flight, and I was able to board, a full two hours late. During the four hour flight I couldn't sleep; I spent a lot of time thinking about how good a father my Dad had been, and how good a grandfather. I wished I'd been able to see him more.

For the past few months, my father's life had changed. No longer safe in his apartment, we wanted to move him somewhere where he could get some care. My sister began the search for a nursing home.

My father had always been adamant that he didn't want to go into a place like that. He valued his independence too much, and didn't want people looking after him. But there were problems finding a place for him, and he was temporarily assigned a small room in a medical facility where he could be watched.

Ironically, my father still had all of his mental faculties ... and then some! He still enjoyed reading the latest adventure novels, the same ones I enjoyed. At the medical facility, he enjoyed talking to the nurses about what he'd been reading. They enjoyed it too ... the other residents were far gone in dementia or Alzheimer's and weren't very good company, but they could always talk to my father. In the short time he was there they grew to love him.

But he couldn't walk. And he was very weak ... his ninety-year-old heart wasn't up to the job.

As the plane was landing, I looked out at the airport, wondering who would be there to meet me. I hoped whoever it was would take me directly to my father. I wanted to see how he was doing, for myself. I wanted to find out if he would recover. More than anything else, I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to hear him call me 'Will' at least one more time. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him. I'd brought him a book.

As I entered the small terminal, I could see my sister and brother in the distance. As they got closer, I looked for signs of encouragement on their faces.

The tears in my brother's eyes told me I was too late.

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This is a true story. It's one I've always wanted to do ... but it was the hardest story I've ever written.

In the last year of his life, my father recorded an audio tape where he talked about all the things he'd done in his life. There's a lot of family history on that tape ... but I've never been able to listen to it. Hearing his voice again would be too difficult.

Maybe I can listen to it now.