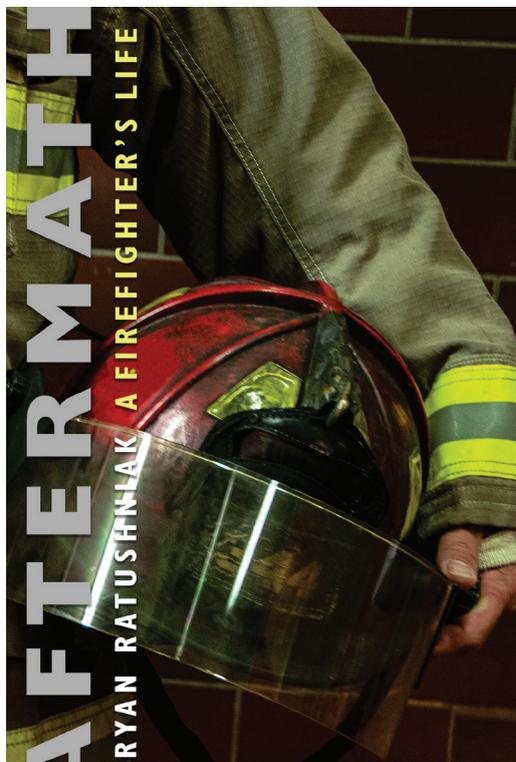


**Excerpt from *Aftermath: A Firefighter's Life*
by Bryan Ratushniak**



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The End of a Career

I made it to retirement after thirty-two years and one month on the job (the extra month was so I could squeeze in a final birthday before I threw in the towel). The last year or so had been tough mentally. Physically I had the usual aches and pains a firefighter suffers: bad back, sore knees, and pain in my elbows from torn muscles and ligament damage. And sleeping was getting difficult as traumatic memories increasingly snuck into my head at bedtime.

I felt as if I had overdosed on dead people. I was really tired of seeing death over and over again. It wasn't just the gross, messy deaths that result from traffic accidents or subway suicides that bothered me, but also the everyday kind of dying that a firefighter sees on the job: the ninety-year-old gentleman who died in his sleep, the seventy-five-year-old woman who died of cancer. I was taking on the grief and sadness that surrounded every passing of a loved one. I was struggling mentally. I couldn't face the death anymore — I'd had my fill.

I began taking time off work. I wasn't sure how much more mental anguish I could stand. I really loved fighting fires, but even that was becoming more difficult. I had recently started taking blood pressure medication for a previously undetected arrhythmia, found by accident during a routine cardiac stress test. As a result, the extreme physical exertion from firefighting became debilitating.

One night before a scheduled shift, I told my wife Sue that I felt trepidation about going in to work. Anxiety. She told me to see how I felt in the morning, and if I was still anxious I could book

the day off if I needed to. The next morning the alarm went off at five, as it always did before a shift. I lay in bed, deciding whether I was strong enough to face work. I wasn't, but I also wasn't about to get Sue worrying about me fearing my job.

On my way to the fire hall I was blasting seventies rock on the car radio. I was stuck in the past I guess, reliving rock's heyday. Maybe I was reliving my teenage dreams of being a rock star. On the road up ahead, obscured by the glare of headlights, I could see what looked like something lying on the tracks in front of a streetcar. Maybe it was a large carpet or building material that fell off the back of a truck.

As I changed lanes to bypass the obstruction, I could see the silhouettes of two people standing over whatever was in the road. As I got closer, I saw that it was a motorcycle lying on its side, next to a motionless person on the ground. I pulled the car over, put on the emergency flashers, and ran over to see if I could help.

A man was standing over the motorcyclist, talking to a 911 operator on his phone.

He told me the bike had smashed head-on into the front of the streetcar. The motorcyclist lay on his back, motionless, with an obvious head injury. I checked his pulse — he was VSA (vital signs absent). I started chest compressions and advised the man with the phone to update the 911 dispatcher that cpr was in progress, administered by a fire department captain on his way to work.

The crew from the fire hall just around the corner responded and arrived within a couple of minutes. I updated the firefighters about the patient's condition as they took over the life-saving efforts. I then cleaned myself up at the fire truck, thanked the crew, and continued on to the fire hall for my shift. I was shaken. I was trying to convince myself that I wasn't, but I was shaken.

A couple of hours into my shift, I received a call from the fire

department information officer. A close friend of the motorcycle victim had called him and wanted to know if she could talk to me. I assured the information officer that I would be fine with that. In my mind, though, I just wanted to get rid of the thought of another life taken too early, someone else I had failed to save. I wanted to forget the whole traumatic affair, but I called her anyway.

The woman had known the victim very well — he was her fiancé's best friend. He had been scheduled to speak at their upcoming wedding. Her fiancé was taking the death of his friend very hard. He wanted to meet me, to thank me for trying to help and for being with his best friend when he died.

I met them both and passed on my condolences. I went to the man's funeral. I met his mother. She thanked me too. She took a photo of me to send to her family overseas who couldn't make it to the service. As someone who never again wanted to see death, I took it on the chin. They were grieving, they were hurting.

And I was too. At that same time, my sister was dying of cancer. I knew the pain the man's family and friends were feeling. I hoped that, when the time came for my sister to be taken from us, I would also have someone who understood share in the grieving process.

I lost my sister Brenda six months later. It was the weekend of my fifty-third birthday. I began to ponder about the right time to pull the plug on my firefighting career.

On Brenda's birthday, six months after she passed, I was spending time at the cottage, remembering my funny sister. I was so proud of her when, at the age of fifty-three, she competed in her first fitness

competition. When she was getting sicker, I asked her how she felt about the inevitable. "I feel so sad, so very sad," she said. "There are so many things I still want to do."

Brenda had been set to retire and was making plans for the future after thirty years as a social worker, years of devoting herself to helping people. When she retired she wanted to continue to help people, spiritually and physically, through yoga and massage. She had built her dream house with her loving partner, Dale. It was outfitted with a gym, a hot tub, and massage rooms for her next chapter in life: being the proprietor of her own spa.

Brenda didn't make it to the opening of her spa. She didn't make it to her daughter's wedding. Sitting by the lake watching the sunset, I decided then and there that on my next birthday I would pack it in. There was too much living that I still wanted to experience.