

# KAREN KELLEY

## The Lug Nut

IT BURNED A COLD hole in his hand as he stared at it. Well, I love you too Dad, Scott thought as he turned the worn piece of metal over in his fingers. Flipping it in the air and deftly catching it, he wondered how far he could throw it. At eighteen he was sturdily built from long summers of bailing hay for local farmers. By the time school started in the fall he was tough as nails and ready for football. He loved the sport for two reasons. First of all it was a physical outlet for his youthful energy. “Where else can you knock a guy down and get away with it?” he would laugh. The other reason was that it was “his” game, not his father’s. When his dad wasn’t working he would be over at Twin Oaks playing a round of golf. The small course was close enough to the house that if his dad had too much to drink he could usually make it home safely — well at least as far as the driveway. Scott, or one of his brothers, would watch for the car’s headlights as he pulled in at night. If he hadn’t made it into the house in a reasonable period of time, someone would go out and bring him in. This became neces-

sary after a few times of finding him at the bottom of the steep slope behind the house where he had tried to take an unsteady pee. Armed with flashlights, the boys followed the sounds of his moans and retrieved him. No easy job for teenagers. "Dad wasn't a little guy," Scott would recall, "and hauling his butt up that slope wasn't fun."

Yet for all the anger that he carried in this father-son relationship, Scott had an easy smile. If you would look at the team photos he stood out. Number 50 was always grinning while the other players wore their newly discovered manhood on soft faces with fierce looking stares. "Tough guise," as one author I read put it. Uniquely, this seventeen year old didn't need to posture for the camera. "Who can intimidate me?" he'd say. "My dad was 6'8" and 220 pounds. If he didn't scare me — nobody could."

Today though, there was no smile as his Irish brows knit together over piercingly blue eyes. The muscles in his tanned arm rippled as he angrily pitched the rusted lug nut into the meandering creek below. Standing on the deck of the family's house that overlooked Mill Creek, he held back tears of anger. "Damn. Damn!" he choked under his breath as he whirled around and struck the rough sawn siding with his fist. The pain of his bleeding knuckles felt good as it replaced the pain in his chest. What did I expect? he thought. A new car? Hell, even a pat on the back or a handshake saying he was proud of me wouldn't kill him. All his life he struggled for respect from this imposing figure who was his father. Now today, on his graduation from high school, all he had gotten from his dad was this worn out piece of metal — a lug nut. When he left home . . . he never went back.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS later the pain was still alive as Scott shared with me the story of his life growing up with a distant

and alcoholic father. The years had been tumultuous for him as well. After his graduation his parents had divorced and his father moved to Arizona. In the meantime Scott had married his high school sweetheart. Those happy days were short lived and quickly decayed to a living hell.

Later his ex admitted, "I was miserable and wanted to make you miserable too." Complaining that he didn't bring enough money home, she then found fault when he took a second job. "You are never home. I'm raising the kids all by myself." Facing up to his father hadn't prepared him to face up to her. It was a whole new ballgame and one that he couldn't win. It was during this time of turmoil Scott found out his father was dying.

"Dad didn't tell any of us kids personally, instead we each just got a photocopied letter with a check mark beside our names. It said that he had cancer and only had a few months to live. He just was letting us know but didn't want any special treatment or anyone to come visit him. He had a good life and he was satisfied. He signed it: Love, Dad."

Studying my expression, he paused. My eyes were wide open and I was slowly shaking my head.

"What did you do?"

Wiping his broad hand across his face (as he always does when he's stressed) he said, "I went out to see him. I needed resolution. I couldn't let it end this way even though it didn't seem to matter to him. So I packed a bag and flew out." The floorboards under his feet creaked as he shifted his weight off his bad knee. "I was nervous as I walked up to his door. Heck, we hadn't seen or talked to each other in over 7-8 years, I didn't expect a warm welcome and so I wasn't surprised when Dad's first words to me were 'What the hell are you doing here?'"

"Ouch! That must have hurt."

I was surprised when he laughed. "Actually I smiled. It was like the old days.

So I took a deep breath and said I was there to see him and wasn't he going to invite me in?"

Scott went on to relate how over the next few days the wrinkles in their relationship relaxed like an old shirt under the Arizona sun. They visited some of his father's favorite places outside of Tucson in the high desert. Standing on an overlook one afternoon his father pointed to a valley and said, "That's where I want my ashes scattered." Scott smiled appreciatively. The area was beautiful and it was something they quietly enjoyed together. Sensing this long awaited bond his father said softly, "You know I don't know why I treated you harder than the others." Then with a pause and what sounded like a sigh, he turned around and headed to the car never to speak of it again. That admission was a great relief to Scott. At least his father recognized his part in their dysfunctional relationship and though it was as close to an apology as he was going to get, when he left his heart was lighter because of it.

This brief moment of peace and resolution ended when Scott returned home. Walking in his front door he waited for the kids to rush up to him as they always did when he'd been gone. Instead the house was quiet and empty. A note was laying on the kitchen table from his wife saying she needed "time to think." She and their three small children were gone. Devastated, he worked hard toward a reconciliation that was never really intended to occur. Though in the coming months she would send him letters saying that she knew it was "God's will" they get back together, that time never materialized. The "time" she really needed was the time it took to empty their savings and checking accounts so she could pay an attorney. Now dealing with a looming divorce, he got more bad news. His dad had died.

Retreating into the darkest part of a man's cave, he put in even longer hours at

work than he had before. In a sense, since the separation, he had been supporting two households, hers with the kids and his own. But "work was a friend," he recalls. The long hours kept his mind off his problems and, anyway, going home to an empty house had no appeal. His kids weren't there and they had been the only ones that were glad to see him. After the divorce he moved into an old, abandoned farm house. But until he could afford to fix it up and get heat in it, the children couldn't spend time with him there. The only bright spot was the help his former father-in-law provided in getting that accomplished. "He was closer to me than my own father," Scott would later say. "We had a special bond."

But the 120 hours a week left him blindly tired and exacerbated the knife-like pain that carved the word "failure" into his soul. Failure as a son. Failure as a husband. Failure as a dad. One night he put a revolver to his head and pulled the trigger. The hollow click of metal on metal echoed through the empty house. There was no explosion, no peace, no comforting darkness — just one more failure. Sitting at the scarred, second-hand kitchen table he wept uncontrollably. With his father's death he felt lost. It was over. No more opportunities to apologize or even find more reasons to leave the barriers up.

Then it happened.

"I was shaking and weak when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Startled, I quickly sat up and turned around. No one was there, but I swear to God I felt a hand! At first I was scared and then a sense of peace swept over me and I began to calm down. Somehow I knew it would be all right." His next sigh dripped like blood from an open wound. Shaking his head he quietly said, "I would like to believe it was Dad letting me know that he cared after all. I really needed to know that someone did. Or maybe it was God's way of telling me that he was my Father and had been there all along. I don't

know — but it saved me. I put the gun away and never ever thought about suicide again.”

When you love someone, really love them, their pain is yours. It was almost more than I could bear. Yet as I tried to sort through all the traumatic things that had happened to him I was looking in particular for a clue as to why this relationship with his father had been so difficult. Marriages have their own ethos and pathos but the bond between a parent and a child should make its way full circle to love before one of them passes away.

I thought about how Scott, when telling stories from the past, seemed to almost enjoy the competition in outsmarting his father. Their relationship was dysfunctional, complex and typical all at the same time. Whether he knew it or not the “chip” he had on his shoulder as a teenager was actually a “chip off the old block.” Perhaps that was why his father was so hard on him. He saw reflected in his son a lot of his own youthful attitudes.

As he spoke about his “lousy graduation gift” my mind drifted back to something he had told me that had happened when he was about sixteen. His dad had been trying to take a tire off the family car and one lug nut was rusted on and he couldn’t get it off. Scott saw him struggling and could see that his father was frustrated. “I told him that I could get it off and Dad said that he doubted it but I could try. Two hours later I walked into the kitchen and slapped the lug nut down on the table in front of him.” His dad said nothing, but Scott didn’t care. Persistence and a healthy young male ego had won out. It was another victory against the man that didn’t respect him.

As I was thinking about this he broke off telling the story. “Hello, McFly?” he teased. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” My face flushed hot with embarrassment. “It’s just that what you

said made me think about the time you were able to get the tire off the car when your dad couldn’t.”

His eyes lit up and he grinned.

“I didn’t surprise him very often. But that day I did.”

I knew I was onto something here. Taking a deep breath I pressed forward.

“Well, I think when you graduated with your class you surprised him again.”

Puzzled, he stared at me and I continued.

“You once told me that you had a hard time in school and even though your parents didn’t know you had dyslexia, they still arranged special tutoring for you didn’t they?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Even some of your teachers made fun of you. They would say, ‘One more time for Scott.’”

The smile left his face and his eyes took on a steely glint.

“It was embarrassing. I quit trying.”

As that painful memory stabbed at him, I quickly pressed forward. Almost breathlessly I burst out, “I just realized why your dad gave you the lug nut! He was trying to say that he was very proud of you for graduating with your class.”

“Heck of a way to show it.”

“Babe, there are a lot of men, especially back at that time, who had a hard time expressing their feelings. From what you’ve told me I can tell that your dad was that kind of guy. It may have even been a reason why he drank so much. So he gave you the lug nut. He had kept it for a year as a symbol of your persistence and strength of character.”

“Two years,” Scott corrected, but there was a stunned expression on his face. “I threw it in the creek.” Staring off into the distance he tried to remember where it landed over twenty years ago.

“My attitude. My stinkin’ bad attitude. I should have been smart enough to

recognize it.”

It was a pivotal moment when one of the whys of life became clear. For my husband the struggles growing up were part and parcel of the struggles of his own father. There were other issues no doubt but ever so briefly a big hand from the past, in the form of a memory, came to rest on his shoulder once again. This time it healed the open wound in his heart, too. Most of the years of his young manhood had been spent trying to win the approval of someone who didn't know how to express it. It was hidden under his father's own painful issues. Often these things cause some to build a wall around their heart. While it does keep some of the pain out — it also holds their love in. Like a stagnant pond with no inflow or outflow their emotional health has difficulty supporting *real* life for both the person and those around them.

This wall was passed on from father to son like a genetic trait and at the first sign of hurt or pain it quickly built on the foundation that was started decades before. When I first met Scott a friendship began to bloom. But ever cautious he kept his wall of protection in place. Now, six years later, as a happily married man, that winning smile has returned. His old friends notice it too. Jokingly he tells them, “I was building a wall and turned around only to find her handing me the bricks!” With that, I quickly retort, “Wall? What wall? I saw a door.” Then we laugh and hug.

Remembering the lug nut, he doesn't hesitate to tell his own teenage son that he loves him. “I love you too Dad,” is the quick response. Neither of these men need an icon to represent their affection for one another and so a worn piece of metal lies quietly on the bottom of Mill Creek rusting away to oblivion.