

Saturday, August 27, 2005 – (Fenelon Falls, Ontario)

Rain drops began to mark the scorched pavement as Mike swung his leg over the gleaming tank of his new Electra Glide Harley and carefully adjusted the wing mirror for the hour and a half ride home. It had been one of those perfect summer days in Fenelon Falls, the “jewel” of Kawartha Lakes country. Mike Kruger (58) and his wife Sharon (56) had been up at the marina working on their boat and had just christened her “Lady Cameron” – a little grand for an old house cruiser— but a classic case of beauty in the eye of the beholder. They had worked on her for three days and were satisfied that, although there was still a lot to do, there was no immediate rush. There would always be next summer.

Sharon, a seasoned passenger, climbed on the back and tightened her chinstrap mechanically, rehearsing a mental checklist of boat lock-up, keys, purse. All clear, she nodded to Mike for take-off and the invisible clock that was set at 22 minutes began its backward count. Sharon hadn't noticed the rain, but the warm, humid breeze evoked pleasant thoughts of definite progress in the boat's restoration and the impromptu breakfast at the cottage that morning with her parents and three siblings. She gave a contented sigh, inaudible over the deep-throated engine. *20 minutes.* Mike turned north onto Hwy. 35 and made the short jog over to the Glenarm Road in his usual meticulous way, keeping perfect symmetry with the white lines. *You would think after all these years of riding bikes, he would ease up on the perfection a little.* After 38 years of marriage, Sharon still found Mike's predictable attention to detail amusing.

16 minutes. The intermittent drops progressed into a light rain now, releasing an earthy smell not unwelcome in cottage-country and the sun eked out a few bold rays despite the increasing cloud cover. Visibility was still good as there were two hours to go before sunset and Mike planned to be home before dark with no intention of getting the bike wet. *10 minutes.* He respected his bikes (even convincing Sharon to relegate a room on the main floor of their new home as a sort of showroom). He chose to ride when the weather was right. Tonight, however, was an exception because he had to get Sharon home to be with her Sunday school class the next morning. Stormy weather was in the forecast but not expected until much later. After all, the bike *could* handle a little rain and he could certainly handle the roads. No worries. *3 minutes.*

Mike slowed down until he cleared the hamlet of Argyle, then kept the throttle steady at 80 km/h traveling west on the wide-open straights and gentle curves. *60 seconds.* The Glenarm Road afforded them a typical rural Ontario view of quaint farmsteads and ripe cornfields. *30 seconds.* There was a familiar set of bends up ahead, so Mike geared down for the approach and leaned gently into the first. *10 seconds.* With perfect control, he took the bend routinely which was followed by a half-kilometer straight before the next. One easy curve after another. *7 seconds.* An oncoming east-bound SUV emerged from the farther bend and came into full view. Suddenly, Mike's ease erupted into disbelief. *He's in my lane! 6 seconds.*

Initial shock triggered experienced reflexes. Mike knew he had to take control of this potential nightmare and get the

bike out of the vehicle's path. He banked an immediate hard left. *5 seconds.* In nearly 40 years of riding, Mike had never had a serious accident and certainly never caused one. Driving was his livelihood as a veteran Toronto Transit bus/subway/LRT operator; he couldn't afford to be careless. Even in his younger days, he exhibited incredible skill at the amusement fairs when he rode “The Globe of Death” motorcycle stunt show before anxious spectators. Then there were the two years as riding instructor for the Ministry of Transportation and the many U.S. road trips, where he had encountered potentially dangerous situations before and knew how to react. While this one topped the list, it wasn't beyond his ability even with a passenger on the back. Ability, skill – he had it all but one thing he hadn't factored in: it was August 27, 2005 and he was scheduled to die. The appointment had been made. *4 seconds.*

No negotiating, no postponing, no avoiding. Death barter with no man. Each will keep his appointment. When Mike rode out of the Fenelon Falls Marina, he had no idea that he had only 22 minutes left. *Carpe diem or seize the day* were among his last words at breakfast. “You never know when your time is up,” he added lightheartedly. Seven hours later, the day would not be seized but Mike would. *But I'm not ready! The boat's only half done and Sharon can't manage it by herself. And the grandkids! I'm their Opa – I want to wait till they grow up! I haven't even retired yet. I'm healthy! I can't believe it would happen this way – no warning? so sudden, so...*

Three. Two. One. The eastbound SUV driver tried desperately to repair his loss of control with a hard right to regain his

own lane, but in a sudden, horrific crash, the two collided. Tragically, Mike Kruger was killed instantly. His brand new bike became an unrecognizable heap of twisted metal. Silently, the clock struck zero.

The angel of Death rode off with its victim, intending to return for another – Sharon. One was taken, the other left behind. On impact, her body became a human projectile and was literally pulled apart by the force of collision. Barely alive, she lay broken and torn. Sharon sustained massive injuries: damage to liver, bladder, bowels, stomach, and lungs; many broken bones including, ten ribs, both ankles, right hand, sternum and a severely broken pelvis; lacerations to limbs and face; large gaping wounds on her left leg and at the base of her spine; but miraculously minimal head injuries and hardly a scratch on her helmet.

A retired paramedic was the first on the scene, followed by emergency workers who tended to her, but believed that their urgent efforts were futile as she wouldn't survive the night. In addition, the approaching storm prevented them from airlifting her to the Critical Care Unit of Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto. It would be five hours before she would arrive there by ambulance with only a 20 percent chance of survival. In 24 hours, she received over one hundred units of blood.

For two weeks, Sharon hung between life and death in a coma while her family kept vigil: praying. Weeks turned into months. She would need seven months of hospital care, including several major surgeries before she would begin to recover from the agonizing trauma of August 27th.