

For Jessica

By AJ Hoge

I cried and wailed for you--- bit my lips, shook my head, crouched and tied myself into fetal knots, but nothing—absolutely nothing—can soothe this loss. I struggle for words but all mine end in platitudes. I'm devastated... but that word means nothing compared to this experience.

I looked around your funeral and saw a horde of diminished lives....so much suffering... so many regrets... so many doubts. They cried about things they'd said or things left unsaid. I saw confusion.... people gibbering on the edge of madness asking, "why, why, why, why, why?". I saw people who'd remained close to you-- people who'd drifted away. I saw, and felt, pain.

I saw people just like me—crying because your light is gone from our lives. This can't be real... the horror of your death is impossible to understand. Of all people, why you? And why your sweet Heather (who had your irresistible eyes and irrepressible spirit) ... and why Benjamin (who had such a divine sweetness). This cannot be real because my mind can make no sense of it.

I cannot comprehend the finality of these events and cannot bear its consequences. I still hope to call you on the phone and tell you about my travels... and hear the latest about your children, Jon, and our old friends. I want to do this, but I can't.

Thicht Naht Hahn wrote, "A wave on the ocean has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. But the wave is full of water. If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water, identifies itself with water, then it will be free. Each wave is born and is going to die, but the water is free from birth and death. So too are we". I hope this is true.

But you are gone now and I have no hope. I don't believe that healing is possible. I don't believe your death can be accepted.

I have no hope... and yet I search for it. I feel that healing is doomed and yet I pray for healing. I want to sink into despair and surrender but I fight for meaning instead; because I don't have to guess what you would say to us—I know what you would say because your life shouted it with thunderous clarity... you would tell us to live with the pain and live with the doubt, but live nonetheless. You would tell us to live with joy, with love. You'd tell us to never surrender to despair. You would not equivocate in the face of tragedy. You never did.

I remember that you never gave into despair, never turned to cynicism, never embraced pessimism, never used pain as an excuse to harden. Your life leaves no ambiguity. We know how you lived, and we know what you would say.

I remember that your joy could not be suppressed and a thousand sorrows could not diminish it. You had a manic energy that buoyed everyone in your vicinity—none could resist or oppose you.

I remember you throwing water balloons from rooftops and grinning like an angel.

I remember you dancing like a dervish in a blue dress-- your green eyes flashing, your dress hem spinning wildly.

I remember your sunflower hat and rainbow high tops.

I remember you shooting a crossbow and dancing a jig when you hit your target.

I remember you holding snakes, feeding owls, rescuing possum.

I remember you hanging upside-down from a rappelling rope, laughing and grinning and scaring me witless.

I remember parties at Gil's when you'd crank Led Zeppelin and shake your golden hair- you bounced and shook the floorboards.

I remember the awe struck look in Charles' eyes whenever he looked at you.

I remember the sadness you disguised with laughter.

I remember the sweetness of your smile when you discussed Jonathan.

I remember my own dark lurking presence— your sad patience with my jealous rantings—the resignation in your voice, the frustration in your eyes.

I remember your late night sewing sessions at the villa... talking manically... listening with wide eyes.

I remember your irresistible energy. I remember your fierce hip checks during toli games... and the time you drug down Scott Ennis during a football match (he smiled sheepishly as we laughed).

I remember you screaming your lungs out at Rush concerts.

I remember that you grew wild gardens full of herbs.

I remember that you saw... you touched... and you listened.

I remember that you were honest (though some called you “tactless”). You were forgiving (though some called you “foolish”). You were kind (though some called you “soft”). And you were optimistic (though some called you “romantic”). You ignored the cynics.

I remember that you were never guarded, never smug, never cool. Your moves were not studied, your words were not rehearsed, your love was not demanding. You never tried to impress and thus you impressed everyone you encountered. In your presence we all became romantics. You made people better. You made me better.

You are gone now, but we are all thinking of you.

When I think of you my first thought is of sunflowers. You used to have a green floppy hat with a yellow sunflower on the front. You had a sunflower heart too—bright, open, vibrant.

Maybe we should have filled the funeral home with sunflowers. For me it was nearly unbearable—the pain was too much. Yet my eyes continued to drift to the back corner... to the cluster of bright balloons. I smiled despite the pain.

In our shock and horror we had to wail and cry and moan and we'll continue to do so for a long time. But maybe someday we can gather again- when we are able- and truly celebrate your life. Perhaps we'll wade in sunflowers and fill the room with balloons and wear floppy hats. We'll let our dogs and children run and we'll let the sun shine on our hair... and we'll think of you and your beautiful smile. And we'll smile too.

I can't do that now, but I want to because I know it's what you would do. Maybe on that day we'll forgive the people who have wronged us. Maybe we'll be honest instead of tactful and warm instead of cool. Maybe we'll give without expectation. Maybe we'll love without trying to love and be good without trying to be good; and for that day we'll remember the child-like sweetness that most of us have forgotten. We'll forget cynicism and abandon guile.

We will be like you—feisty and alive... and we'll forget how we're supposed to act and act as we always should.

I hope we'll give you the memorial that you truly deserve—the one that, in our pain, we cannot give now. I hope we'll forget ourselves and be more like you, because your life is the only memorial that is good enough.

On that day, in the future, we'll remember you and forget our loss. And by remembering you we will also remember that our jobs don't matter, that our egos are a burden, that there are no rules and no commandments, and that there is no religion and no philosophy but love.

I hope we'll play games on that day and dance, because you'd like that too.

You are gone now, but I know that this is not goodbye. We will meet again; until then I'll continue to think of sunflowers-- and remember you.