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A Voice From Beyond The Grave

On May 27 Jeff Hunter died in Valley Hospital following a fall in his Van Nuys home. Jeff was an affable and well-liked man and all of Hollywood was shocked and saddened by his untimely death. At 42, Jeff had starred in nearly 50 pictures. His greatest role was that of the Christ in “King of Kings” in 1961. His survivors include a son, Christopher, by his first wife, Barbara Rush, and three others – Todd, Scott and Steele – by his second wife, Joan (Dusty) Bartlett. Two months before his death, Jeff married actress Emily McLaughlin. This story reveals that Jeff probably had more happiness in those two months of marriage than most men have in a lifetime.

Less than a year ago, Emily McLaughlin faced a lonely Christmas. Newly divorced from her husband of many years, Bob Lansing, she sat down to pen the “Christmas poem” which was a tradition in her life. Each year she wrote a short verse, encompassing the things that were closest to her heart, and placed it in the Christmas stocking of her 11-year-old son Bobby.

“I’m standing here with the earth around my feet,
No one to wait for, no one to meet,
No hand to touch, and nothing to reach,
But the sky, the far mountains and me.”

This year the lyrics seemed to sing eloquently of her loneliness and her boundless capacity for love.

Shortly after that Jeffrey Hunter came into her life. He came into it with a song and a warm-hearted smile, and a promise for the future.

They were married and planned to live happily ever after. This happiness lasted just two short months. Late in May, Jeff was found dying at the foot of a stairway in their home, which only a few short hours before echoed with love and laughter. An autopsy revealed that he had suffered a massive intercranial hemorrhage at the top of the stairway, which precipitated the fall. The fall itself brought about greater cranial trauma, fracturing



Emily and JEFF HUNTER

*“No Hands to Touch...
And Nothing to Reach”*



his skull. He was rushed to the hospital and hasty brain surgery performed, but it was futile...his life slowly ebbed away.

Emily, who as “Nurse Brewer,” had been calm and efficient at so many bedside tragedies in “General Hospital,” was placed under heavy sedation.

Learning this tragic news, we remembered, with a pang the radiant happiness of this girl, whom he had interviewed only a short two weeks earlier in her dressing room at ABC on the subject of her fairy tale romance.

“You want to hear about my marriage,” she had said. “Wonderful. There’s nothing in the world I’d rather talk about than my marriage!”

Crisp and spritely in a pink checked gingham shirt dress, she radiated an infectious happiness which she seemed eager to share with one and all. It was easy to understand how Jeff Hunter found it impossible to resist her, and swept her straightaway into matrimony on an acquaintance of less than three-and-a-half weeks.

“Our romance is right out of an old musical of the 1940’s,” she laughed. “Would you believe, Jeff proposed to me as we were sipping cocktails at the Top of the Mark, watching the sun go down behind the Golden Gate Bridge!”

“I had gone to a cocktail party alone the night we met,” Emily went on. “I only intended to stay ten minutes. It’s so awkward to be at loose ends in a social situation like that...Jeff had come alone, and he was leaving early, too. We ran into each other at the door going out. He took my coat and persuaded me to stay a while.”

They left together and went to Emily’s house for a midnight snack of leftovers from her New Year turkey.

Eleven-year-old Bobby, son of Emily’s broken marriage to Bob Lansing, was still up and hard at work writing music.

Musically inclined from his early childhood, Bobby was in the process of composing a song for his mother’s Christmas lyrics.

Jeff was intrigued. He had never known a mother-son song-writing team before, especially one of which the son was a scant 11 years old and the mother warm, friendly and beautiful.

Next morning he phoned early. “Get Bobby on the other phone,” he said, “and listen!”

Jeff, an accomplished organist, had perfected Bobby’s song. He was playing it now, with the open telephone lying on top of the organ.

“No hand to touch...and nothing to reach...”

In the next few days the music that came out of the house was sweet indeed. Bobby played his drums with a new gusto, and Jeff made Emily’s piano sing.

In the second week of their acquaintance Jeff had to go to San Francisco for ABC to appear on a TV show. He arranged for Emily to be invited also as a panel guest.

It was here, at the Top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel, that he made his “musical-of-the-1940’s” proposal.

“Two weeks were all we needed,” Emily insists. “It was like we’d known each other forever. We are both Scotch. His real name is McKinnies and mine is McLaughlin. We were both Sagittarians – both just six days apart. We even *think* alike. When Jeff starts a sentence, I can finish it!”

This was the dawning of their own *Age of Sagittarius*. They returned to Los Angeles, got innumerable papers signed and carried out all the other preparations necessary for a valid Mexican marriage – including getting the written approval of Emily’s ex-husband, from whom she had not yet gotten her final decree.

Then, taking small Bobby along to be “best man,” they flew to Juarez.

“We had to sign yards and yards of papers,” Emily says. Jeff had arranged things in advance so it would all be very legal, but it seemed as though there was no end to the paper work. Each new legal paper that was thrust under their faces by a new Mexican official, Bobby would say: ‘*Is this it? Are they married yet?*’”

“After the jillionth set of signatures, we were indeed married, and happy as larks. I didn’t feel very dressed up. I wore a rather simple navy blue dress – the only new thing I owned. Jeff remembered my New England heritage, and bought me a gold pin shaped like a maple leaf, with a set of matching earrings.

The new Mr. And Mrs. Jeff Hunter and son (who had already elected to call Jeff “Dad”) crossed back across the border from Juarez into El Paso that night. They had a gala dinner for three in the motel dining room where an orchestra was playing romantic music. Before long Bobby and Jeff were up on stage with the musicians, Jeff

playing organ and Bobby at the drums, and serenading the new bride. Emily's heart, beneath her brand new gold maple leaf, beat wildly with love and pride and happiness.

The honeymoon came later.

Jeff had to leave almost immediately after the marriage in Juarez to make a picture in Spain. Emily's commitments kept her in Hollywood, but she did arrange to join him (with Bobby) a couple of weeks later.

A honeymoon in Spain sounds idyllic. Actually, it was marred by an incredible series of misfortunes – misfortunes which, in light of the recent tragic event, may have presaged an incipient brain damage.

These misfortunes began, as a matter of fact, on the very eve of Jeff's departure. Emily, who was working long hours at the studio, had arranged for her butcher to cook a turkey. Jeff picked it up, not realizing it came complete with hot gravy. He spilled the gravy and suffered third degree burns so severe that next day, on his flight to Spain, he went into shock. He was hospitalized his first week in Spain. The picture had to shoot around him.

A week-and-a-half after this ordeal – and right after Emily arrived with Bobby, Jeff sustained severe powder burns from an accident on the set. "A technician was supposed to blow out a car window. Instead he blew it *in*," Emily explains.

Once again Jeff was hospitalized.

Recovering, finally, from this injury he sustained a third accident. He was "horsing around" with an old friend, a British Commando, on the set, who fainted with a Karate blow which actually struck him, lightly, under the chin. The mock blow fell in such a way that Jeff suffered a stretched nerve and mild concussion.

"He never complains," Emily said. "He just went right on working for five days. Finally, on our way home on the plane, the pressurized cabin set off some sort of chain reaction. Jeff suddenly lost his power of speech, the power of his right arm, and he couldn't walk.

"TWA was just fantastic. They provided a wheel chair at Kennedy Airport, whisked us through customs and got us on a plane for home. They took complete care of our luggage, shipped it out to us, and even delivered it to our door by special limousine."

"I didn't know what was wrong with Jeff; I had a horrible fear of some sort of brain damage. It turned out that he had a vertebrae out of place. He could talk to me only when he twisted his head way over to the side. And he insisted on getting home to Los Angeles, to his own doctor.

"The condition cleared up right away, and we decided that Spain was a jinx. They never did finish the picture. Jeff may be called back to finish it, and I hope by that time the bad spell will be broken.

"What about our lives today? Our lives are just wonderful! We live in an old Spanish style house in Van Nuys in a neighborhood that has 5000 kids in it. Jeff is a sort of Pied Piper. All the kids gravitate to him.

"For our wedding present to each other, we chipped in and bought a new piano. I gave him my half and he gave me his! Jeff has moved in his organ from his Hollywood apartment, and I'm taking lessons. I write songs, Jeff sets them to music, and Bobby beats out the rhythm on the drums. We may set Van Nuys to rocking and rolling yet!

"Are our songs any good? We think they are! My organ teacher has worked out some arrangements, and already some publishers are interested..."

That piano, which they bought jointly as their wedding present to each other, is stilled now. The songs they had planned to sing together will now never be sung.

Emily will sing alone, her own threnody of pain:

"No hand to touch, and nothing to reach,

But the sky, the far mountains, and me..." •