

JANUARY 18, 2009

Eulogy for Lisa J. Flaxman

From Her Loving Husband of 15 Years, Jonathan S. Martel

Ba'shert is a Yiddish word, meaning "meant to be," fate or destiny. Lisa did not know Yiddish and did not relish the sounds of the language and English Yiddishisms the way I always have. It was in fact a source of, shall we say, teasing between us. She loved to protest by crinkling her nose and imitating me that I loved to annoy her with an extra emphasis on the "shhh" sound in any word, as in Yiddishhh or Jewishhh. I remember her first trip to meet my parents in Ann Arbor, where I showed her a letter my father had just received from a relative in Russia written entirely in Yiddish with Hebrew lettering. I asked Lisa if she could tell what it was. Her answer was, "Nepalese"? I never did figure out exactly why she thought I had a letter to my father handwritten in Nepalese. That story has also been a reliable source of teasing for twenty years. Playful is a word that describes Lisa. We shared a love of making up names and words -- for each other, our children, my Datsun 310 that wouldn't make it up the Thurman Arnold building's garage ramp on our first date without a

running start, for our favorite cabin in Northern Michigan and other important places.

But back to ba'shert. I've thought about that word these last days and weeks and months, on many levels, and its significance for Lisa's life and my life with her. First and foremost is our mutual recognition that our lives were meant to be joined. She always described the feeling as "coming home." We met in the fall of 1989, when I learned through a friend that I should meet someone who he thought worked at Arnold & Porter, which I was then joining. We overlapped for just one month at the law firm before she left for a job at a consulting firm, our first kiss was on November 10th before dinner on her last day at the firm, and she was prescient enough to print out beforehand all of the e-mails between us over that month, which I read again this week. On our old mainframe computer, on October 10th, I sent an e-mail to F-L-A-X-M-L-I to find out whether she actually worked there, at 12:33 pm:

I saw a person named Kenny Rivlin this weekend. He said he knew you at Brown, I believe, and said to say "hello." He said you work here, so I figured that I'll find out if the computer says "Bad addresses-want to see them?" Of course, there could be someone else with your 7-letter code, but that's unlikely.

Anyway, we'll see if you're out there. . . here goes. . . .

Her response:

Yes, I am here - it's nice to know I'm not a bad address!

I met her two days later -- the beautiful girl with laser beam almond-shaped eyes, smooth skin, and an infectious smile in a blue dress at the 1st floor elevator -- for lunch. It was fall, and I rescued her at our outdoor table from a bee on her plate by squashing it into her sour cream, and then undid the chivalry by pointing out the spinach stuck to her tooth. (Lisa generally insisted on saving ants and other bugs, but didn't like them, especially millipedes.) Our subsequent e-mail recorded the spinach comment as a faux pas, but that lunch still led to a movie, not memorable except for how impressed she was that I knew that the soundtrack included Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. That led to the Cleveland Orchestra at the Kennedy Center, playing Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony.

It was during the intermission that we began talking about our families. Lisa told me that she had a great-grandmother named Fannie, and a grandfather named Max. Well, I also had a grandmother named Fannie and a grandfather named Max. It was a

little coincidental, but then we are both from an Ashkenazi Jewish background, and all of us are related to someone named Fannie or Max. Of course I knew Lisa's name, and I learned she is the oldest of three girls in her family. Well, I also have three sisters, and my oldest sister is Lisa. And Lisa said she has a younger brother named David. Well, I also have a younger brother David. This was a little odd, but still the names were common (at least among our generation). But then Lisa told me her mother's name -- Rhoda. Well, there is only one person I have ever known in the world by that name -- my own mother Rhoda. Now this was beyond coincidence. And finally, Lisa then revealed that her favorite name was Jonathan, as she had had an older brother by that name, who died as an infant. At that time, people still called me Jon. Lisa disliked that and ever since I've used Jonathan (except for my childhood friends, who may still call me Jonny). Well, this led to more conversation and step-by-step to a place in the Lake District in England the following summer, high on a hill covered with yellow wildflowers, where we fashioned a garland for her hair, a place we have since known only as "The Spot," where we knew, and to the banks of the Potomac at Great Falls, with a blue heron overhead, where we were engaged. We were married 15

years ago, May 23rd, 1993, in Providence, preserved in pictures and video that we reviewed these last few weeks.

It was this special connection and destiny that has sustained us since. At the beginning, we were like a disassembled jigsaw puzzle. The pieces fit together perfectly, we just had to figure out how. I think I was more frugal, analytical and conventional, she prioritized taste and aesthetic and was more of a risk-taker. Our first fight: Lisa objected to my use of a small amount of water to get the last drop of tomato sauce out of the jar. She loved to cook, and was a vegetarian, so it was always up to me to decide whether the chicken was tender or had been “rubberized.” She liked strawberries, but not strawberry things; she liked banana things, but not bananas. I was a perfectionist, and Lisa was not. When we moved a desk I was upset to find that I had put a hole in the top. Lisa was fine, happy to put a pencil holder over the hole. She showed me that imperfections add humanity. Her favorite pianist was Vladimir Horowitz, and she was like him: The music is more important than the notes. We were a bit slow to realize that we would best complement each other if she would drive and I would navigate. The reverse proved disastrous. This was a girlfriend who didn’t find it amusing that it took us two

hours circling the Beltway to get to the Capital Center for the Washington Bullets game in the fourth quarter. Or making an 8-hour drive to Ann Arbor into 14 hours on account of a perceived “shortcut” through Ohio that had us on dirt roads and then crawling for a period behind Amish horse-drawn buggies. She loved to tell the story of the British police in England, I think somewhere around Bath, who stopped me -- she would say weaving on the “wrong” side of the road -- to find out whether I had been drinking. If she found herself errantly in the navigator seat, she would end up remarking, in all seriousness -- “This map is wrong.” In northern Michigan, as we climbed over Sleeping Bear dune there was no sign pointing to Lake Michigan. There was discernible flow of others headed to the right, but Lisa didn’t want to be a lemming and wanted to go left. After an hour or so trudging through the sand in the heat as it began to feel a bit like the Sahara, I had to tell her: “Lisa, I think there was a reason everyone else went to the right.”

Lisa was athletic, but not a sports fan. She was captain of her high school tennis team and claimed that she could “throw like a boy.” As Benjamin and Zachary have come to love baseball, collect cards and know the players, Lisa would proudly recall the one and only

baseball player she could name, “Luis Tiant,” she would say, a pitcher with the Boston Red Sox in the 1970s. She worked out at her gym, but when we both went together when she was in law school she would regularly tell me, as we pulled into a parking spot: “Let’s just go home.” She didn’t like swimming in the cold water, but accepted my dedication to it. She didn’t get Michigan football; at her first game in Ann Arbor against Notre Dame, amidst 110,000 roaring fans, she proclaimed: “You Michigan people are crazy.” We both loved classical music, opera and hiking in remote places, dashing back in a thunderstorm along a ravine to our car on Skyline Drive in Virginia, climbing red rocks alone and 6 months pregnant in Moab, Utah in November 1996, and walking along the wilderness beach in Olympic National Park. And in Israel for our “second honeymoon,” at Masada at sunrise, exploring alone (and maybe a tiny bit scared) at a Crusader fortress near the Lebanese border, and walking amid 2,000 year-old shards of clay pots on the site of another Jewish last stand at a place called Gamla in the Golan Heights. We hiked many times at Sugarloaf Mountain, just minutes from the cemetery where she will rest.

Most importantly, Lisa's essence complemented me. She expressed all of her emotions openly and fully -- humor, love, sadness, fear, frustration and even anger. As I told her mother many times: "It's a package deal." She could have a laughing fit with her children that wouldn't stop. And if she was mad, look out. One of her roommates called it "the Lisa look of death." She could tell if something was bottled up inside, and she would absolutely not allow it. She pried feelings loose, and dealt with them. She insisted on this of others. She would not tolerate inner distress. She absolutely loved a heartfelt card from me above any material birthday or holiday gift (though she didn't mind jewelry and Limoges boxes that I frequently bought her, and the artwork that decorates our home; she wanted diamond earrings, and wasn't fooled for a second when I got her cubic zirconium). I don't think Lisa knew how to keep emotions inside and believed strongly that was unhealthy. She constantly sought and achieved resolution, and would repeat her grandmother's dictate -- never go to sleep mad (and occasionally we got to bed very late). She taught me so much about how to feel, and that is the most important aspect of our fit and her legacy for me.

Our joined destiny was first tested after two years of marriage when we sought to start a family. It wasn't easy, and we started by adopting our dog Boo. As I was wavering on whether to go to rural Maryland to pick out a puppy from the cockapoo litter, Lisa picked up the phone and pretended that the last puppy had been taken, saw me crestfallen, and then insisted we get in the car. With Boo on our bed, Lisa then promptly conceived and we finally had Benjamin Max, named for our common grandfathers, then two-and-a-half years later came Sophie Rachel, whose first name is the same as my childhood dog and whose middle name is after our mothers given during the last stage of my own mother's breast cancer. And then another three years later came Zachary Isaac, named for Lisa's grandfather Irving. There is no connection in the world like that between a mother and her children, and the effort it took to get there gave Lisa extra special gratitude for every moment she had with Benjamin, Sophie and Zachary. Just before Benjamin was born she stopped practicing law, throwing herself into her new motherhood.

It was at this time that Lisa rediscovered her true love of music, the piano and singing. She performed seven months pregnant with Benjamin kicking to the tunes in the chorus of the Washington

Savoyards' Gilbert & Sullivan production of Yeoman of the Guard.

She performed as Annie Oakley in an Irving Berlin review at the National Institutes of Health theater. She sang the National Anthem at the Bethesda Big Train college baseball league game, and looked forward to a chance with the Washington Nationals. And she sang to Benjamin first and to all of them, settings of Mother Goose rhymes and all manner of children's music, leading ultimately to her musiKids business in our living room and then on from there. We took Ben on tour, 1,900 miles in our new minivan to Providence, Rochester, Ann Arbor and back to Washington, stopping every two hours for Lisa to feed him (and to let Boo pee). (I drove and don't recall any navigational errors!)

Lisa loved how Benjamin rocked to "Numbers Rumba," and admired his intensity and dedication of effort at all he does. This has ranged from sports (from baseball, soccer, tennis and table tennis), to his enduring friendships, school work and music (first guitar and drums and then his clarinet, which he played for her this past Tuesday). She admired his willingness to share and express his strong emotions with her, his fears and his love, and his natural affinity for small children, especially the newest cousins. And Sophie

was Lisa's constantly shining star, warm, expressive, and caring. She admired Sophie's natural abilities -- from music to math to art. She was awed by Sophie's artistic ability (something that runs in both our families but not in Lisa or me), her sense for color, painting, and making jewelry. And last Zachary. Zachary was a final gift to Lisa, arriving less than a year before her breast cancer diagnosis. He gave her strength to endure, as she absorbed his sweet breath, blue-eyed gaze and toes. He loved to rub Lisa's nose, and they had recently begun to write a book together noses, still to be finished. His maturity in every way astonished her. His reading, his baseball prowess, and particularly his emotional intelligence. She recorded his responses to her poems, his comprehension and articulation of the deeper meanings she intended. Hearing Lisa read her poem about Zachary, she annotated below the poem that he said in November 2007 (at age 4): "Mommy, so that means you want to let go of the past and look to the future?" And she loved them all together, their uniqueness and their similar ties. (The extra white complexion they got from me, and the hair color they got from her, which she called "mouse brown." That hair, which fell out many times, but at age 43 never had a strand that turned gray.)

The last aspect of our destiny -- and that I have struggled with the most -- is her illness these last five-and-a-half years. I have a hard time conceiving of this as fate under the eyes of any loving God. Lisa's breast cancer and treatment caused her trauma and pain that I still can only imagine, and me a heartbreak beyond words. The most amazing thing, however, is how Lisa's essence not only endured but flourished as she turned outward and shared herself with others as she had not done before. The Lisa that only I, our family and a few close friends knew intimately immersed herself in connecting to others. She always had a gift for relating to the elderly, her grandparents, my grandfather, and a very elderly Holocaust survivor in our neighborhood. But now she reached out to establish a bewildering array of deep and close friendships. Her capacity for genuine interest in others was limitless. Her musiKids business became a vehicle -- she touched customers, mothers, landlords, vendors, her teaching staff. She touched neighbors, the schools, our Temple Sinai community, our barber and auto mechanic, and the Lombardi Cancer Center and its Arts & Humanities program. She went in all directions at once -- a force of nature, as one friend called her. MusiKares, Chemocheer kits, Manna food drives, the Center for

Inspired Teaching, music CD collections for the hospitals, her musiKonnections newsletter, bringing people together. She was recognized for all of this, through formal awards and intimately personal moments. She shared her feelings publicly in her book of poetry, Glances at Time: A Young Mother's Journey with Breast Cancer. She reached out to others facing the same illness, including a perfect stranger wearing a turban and knitting in a restaurant. She had a mission to understand and to help others and she was clear with me about it: If she had limited time to live, she wanted to make the most of every moment by making a difference and connecting to others. As she wrote in the foreword to her book:

My writings are a spider's thread attaching me to my family and friends forever; they will never have to wonder how I felt, they will know, and for that, I am thankful.

Despite the horror of it all, her courage, strength, grace and genuine humanity showered upon and inspired us these last five years. None of this is worth the price, but if Lisa left us with me, her children, her family and all of us with any final lesson of destiny it is that the human spirit can prevail no matter what.

I would like to end by asking Andrew Goldfarb to read an excerpt from the last e-mail exchange from that string Lisa printed out

on November 10, 1989, on Lisa's last day at Arnold & Porter, before I met Lisa, wearing jeans and a white cable knit sweater, for our first kiss and dinner:

Lisa: Good morning. I'm taking advantage of e-mail time, since we'll only be electronically connected for another 32 hours. . . . Won't you be sad when there are no more mail messages to correct? After tomorrow, electronic devices will be silent so you'd better take advantage of today to be nice!

Jonathan: So today is really the end (and a new beginning - perhaps we should call it a "commencement")!? I'll stay on the computer, since it is the last chance -- I can just "feel" the electricity moving between us. What have you chosen to wear for the last image you'll leave on Arnold & Porter?

Lisa: Something elegant, yet subtle, something flowing, yet provocative. It's the latest in fashion, combining elements of the last two hundred years, something that you must see to really experience. I'm going to be running around in the other building today, so I'll stop by (just warning you).

Jonathan: Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue? That sure would leave a lasting impression on Arnold & Porter!!

Lisa: Jonathan, you really make me laugh! . . . I really dread bidding fond farewell to everyone. I'm glad I don't have to do that with you. But I will say goodbye to our e-mail

messages at the end of the day. Is this really it? My eyes are brimming with tears.

Jonathan (LAST MESSAGE): Thank you! That was a very nice message. . . It's nice to end on a happy note, even if ending has to be inherently sad. Though my billable hours will probably go up, I will miss these work breaks. It seems silly for you to ride the Metro home and back here. I gotta get into the "Roaring Mouse" anyway, can I come pick you up? I thought of a fun place to go in Alexandria for dinner. Maybe we can stop by my house on the way to get my shoes. (I'll take the risk of leaving my suit and losing my "older professional" appeal.) You're not in your office now -- call me before you leave. (Is this the last message to FLAXMLI, ever?)

Lisa (LAST MESSAGE): I feel so happy to know we're still electronically connected. I hope we are for a good long time.

Amen.