

Lost Dog

Mimi and I watched "Love Actually" on Friday night. It was the first quiet time we have spent together since she returned from overseas for 6 months. We ate chicken soup and we watched a mushy movie, two of my favourite things. To do it with someone you love, that's another favourite thing. The movie starts with an airport scene with people greeting and hugging and kissing, with Hugh Grant (who is UK's Prime Minister in the movie....some forbearance please) voice-over saying:

"When I think of the gloomy state of the world, I think of the arrival gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinions starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. I see that love is everywhere. Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, it's always there: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from people on board were messages of hate or revenge, they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling that love, actually, is all around."

Mushiness aside, love was all around me this weekend, as was grief and loss. On Saturday afternoon, we found out that Jon, my brother in law who was diagnosed with gallbladder cancer in January, died. We knew it was likely, that it would happen sooner rather than later, but no one, even his oncologist, expected it so soon and in that manner. That's why they'd (Jon and oncologist) said to my sister that it would be fine that she took a bit of time out to go to their property in Tassie for caretaking duties and a rest. And that's why, when Jon's state suddenly went down, he was aware enough to ring my sister and say he loved her and he didn't think that he'd make it until she returned that night. And he was right. By the time they reached the airport, only 1 1/2 hours later and rung in, he was gone. The last thing that he said before drifting off, was to tell Denise he loved her. He died in his sister Becky's arms, with his mother's voice quietly talking him into his quiet place, with his sister and brother in the room, with love all around him. He made sure Denise knew of his love, they were the last words he spoke. It was the love in the room and in his heart that could conquer all but his virulent cancer.

Denise, and our cousin Michael who was with her, went from the airport to the hospital to say the goodbyes. We were all so shocked and sad and we gathered together, to comfort each other. Denise made a decision for all of us that night. We would go to the football as Jon would have wanted on Sunday, to see the Western Bulldogs take on West Coast Eagles. All else could wait.

Meanwhile, shocked and in grief, Rina and I watched some of Saturday night's Cats versus Saints game. We were saying goodbye to a time and place in history when these two teams were more equal. Was that only 4 years ago??

I picked up Becky and Denise the next day from the other side of town, and we made our way into the Docklands, finding a park on Spencer Street, and made our way to the stadium. It was all a bit surreal, the whole afternoon was surreal. Denise and I sat up in her and Jon's seat on the 2nd level for the first half of the game. I bought her a drink before it started, and we found ourselves at a members' function where they were allowing the Doggies supporters to hold the '54 Premiership Cup and take photos, so in a daze, we joined the queue and Denise has a photo. Another reason to remember this day, as if there weren't enough already.

Together we watched the Doggies be only 7 points down first quarter, and one point up at half time. We watched, happy at goals, hopeful, holding each other, having a few tears, and at half time, joined Jon's family. Jon's sister Becky, her partner Ben, their son Hugo, Sarah, the younger sister, her partner Steve, their son Archie and daughter Edie, Jon's brother Tim, and family friends, were all

waiting in the Whitten Bar for us. Their parents watched the game from home. These are true Bulldog people, living in Footscray for most of their lives, loving their Doggies forever, three generations now, bringing neighbours, enduring, cheering, supporting, complaining, and being stoic. The whole meggilah. (Yiddish word for the whole shebang.) Jon and Tim were both part of the Hyde Street Brass Band who used to play at Whitten Oval before games. Their love for the red, white and blue goes deep, and was fundamental to all their lives. Before marrying Denise, he declared she'd have to give up the Bombers (the team of her first husband) and become a Dog. And a Dog she became.

On this night, Denise wore the Mobius circular Bulldogs scarf she'd knitted for Jon and that he wore up until his last stay in hospital. It still smells of him.

In the bar, there was hugging and kissing and crying, holding each other and I was re-meeting Jon's family again at the footy. I'd gone with Denise earlier in the year, so she wouldn't be sitting by herself. We made a toast on this night, to a husband, a brother, an uncle, a friend. And then we went to their seats downstairs, going in a group and sitting all together for the second half. We had wiped the tears. We were ready for the footy again.

And what a second half it was. Five fabulous goals to our Doggies, and West Coast being down by 2.2 at the last changeover. The Dogs played unbelievable footy.

All day we'd wanted the Dogs to play out of their skin, for Jon, and for us, to have a great story to tell, we'd come together and we were celebrating life and living in the face of sickness and death. Football was the adhesion, the focus point for our love and our loss. It was the vessel in which all our emotion could be poured. Jon, a shy and self-contained man, would have been horrified at all the hugging and kissing and crying. But kiss and hug and cry we did.

I cried my way through the final quarter where the Doggies maintained and increased their lead. The old supporters behind were still expecting the usual capitulation and defeat, and were only settled when the Bulldogs put four goals between them and West Coast. Me, the last 48 hours, had all caught up. The Saints annihilation had made me so sad, to see our mighty team once again, floundering. To see the Dogs, who were floundering more last year, get through that awful stage in their rebuild and have confidence and speed and power and pizzazz, to beat the favourite for the night, and to do it with such flair and heart. To lose Jon, so suddenly. It all blurred together.

When the final siren went, all the Doggies supporters went nuts. The relief was palpable. The fans laughed and cheered and were happy. Us? We were sobbing. Absolutely sobbing. We cried and hugged and cried some more, hugging and hugging and all that emotion and love and relief that the game had allowed. A supporter who had sat with this family for over 25 years at both the Western Oval and Docklands, couldn't quite understand our tears. When he asked why we were tearful, I told him, and he wished us well and understood. It was that kind of night. Love, actually, was all around.

The Doggies had won when it wasn't expected. We'd had a celebration victory in the name of our lost Dog, Jon, on a night that was also a fund raising day for Lort Smith Lost Dogs Home, and between Bull Dogs and Lost Dogs we were able to hold Jon to our hearts in a way that meant the world to those of us still here.

Postscript: This was put up by Becky on Jon's blog that kept his friends and colleagues updated with his journey:

Last Post

Jon Hilton. 13/06/1959 – 27/07/2103

Jon passed away quickly and peacefully surrounded by his family at 3.30pm on Saturday July 27th at the Epworth Hospital. Jon slipped away to the sound of his mother's voice.

Jon's enduring passion was the development of an accessible e-health network. His battle with cancer allowed him an insider's view of the system he was working on and his final months led to significant developments in his understanding of the importance of the patient's role within e-health.

There will be a private family ceremony. In lieu of flowers please donate to the Fred Hollows Foundation as a fitting tribute to Jon's life and legacy.

Yvette Wroby

30th July 2013