

**i** was taken aback when the email from a long-lost friend across the ocean appeared in my inbox. I hadn't heard from this friend in almost eight years. "I don't want to see you again," Charmaine had said politely on the phone when I had visited my country of birth.

I had asked her why, after 30 years of loyal friendship, she'd wanted to cut ties. She wouldn't give her reasons and for months afterwards, I pondered what had triggered her decision. I never unearthed a satisfactory answer ... until the email.

In the same week that the email arrived, I had another unexpected encounter. Hearing that my neighbour's husband had been given six months to live, I decided to pop over with some of my left-over birthday cake and say "hi" to Helen and Francis.

Francis was at the kitchen table, eating a hearty breakfast mid-morning, and did not look like a man who was going to die. We chatted amiably for a while and then Francis said, "Have you heard that I am going to die?"

"Yes," I replied. "Helen told me."

There was an infinitesimal pause as I gazed at Francis's handsome features.

"So!" he said. "What do you think? Burial or cremation?"

"Cremation," I replied instantly.

He lunged at me with an open palm and we high-fived each other.

"That's what I think," he said and promptly turned on his heels. "Now I'm off to take a shower." That was the last time I saw Francis. He died peacefully, five days later, of his pancreatic cancer.

Helen and Francis had been married 31 years, and had two grown-up sons. Few tears were shed at the funeral, instead, sublime music filled the church; beautiful prayers were said for the friends



# good GRIEF

**JOSEPHINE BROUARD REFUSES TO EQUATE DEATH WITH SORROW. BUT HER UNORTHODOX ATTITUDE RAISES HACKLES.**

and family present; thanks given for the great life Francis had lived; and jokes made about how he always muddled up his sons' names. "Who cares?" he'd apparently say. "I love you both!"

I came away thinking, "That's how I want to go."

Helen was palpably sad and dazed after Francis went, but also noticeably poised and serene. We talked a lot about how it was impossible to feel excessively bereft ... when one had done one's absolute best for a loved

one while they were still alive. There was sorrow, sure, but there were no "what-ifs" or feelings of "maybe I could have, should have done more".

Also, everyone dies, and when one's time comes, isn't it wiser to accept what is inescapable?

Which brings me to the email from my friend Charmaine. A mutual friend's sudden death had triggered her to write, she said. "I realise that time passes and that it's stupid to hold on to grudges." And then she explained why she had

ended our friendship, and I grinned from ear to ear in recognition of the truth.

I realised that she had expected me to react more traditionally when she called to inform me that my ex-boyfriend Graham had been eaten by a crocodile while canoeing down the Zambezi River.

I had burst out laughing. "Oh my god! Only Graham would die that way! He would have been so pleased!" I was acknowledging my ex's love of African wildlife, and his determination to live an Ernest Hemingway-style life.

Then, a few years later, Charmaine called again with sad news. Another ex, Louis, had committed suicide at age 50. He and I had dated for five years and even got engaged, but he was a troubled soul, and we had eventually parted ways. My reaction? "Oh, that's so sad, but I'm happy for him. He was so unhappy!"

Again, apparently, this was not the response she wanted or expected. "Your reaction was so shocking," she wrote, "that I thought, 'If she can be like this about people she loved, does she love anyone?'"

But did she want me to wail? Gnash my teeth? It appears that that *is* what some people want you to do. When I delivered the eulogy at my father's funeral, a few people remarked, almost crossly, that my voice didn't tremble.

It's true that I barely shed a tear when he died. Diagnosed with stomach cancer, he was in a lot of pain when I Skyped him from my hospital bed, where I was recovering from a knee reconstruction.

"The doctor says I can only fly over in 10 days' time, Pops," I said.

"I don't think I can wait," he replied.

"Don't wait Pops, go when you want to go, okay? You know how much I love you!"

"I know ..." he said, a wan smile momentarily lighting up his face.

My father went before I reached his bedside, and I did not mind at all. Just the year before, I had hosted a one-month 80th birthday celebration for him where I had declared, "Your every wish is my command, Pops, and you will not drive, cook, or pay for anything the entire month."

In death, as in life, it is up to us what we want to make of it all; how we wish to behave, how we choose to react. We can be sentimental, mawkish and full of regrets. Or we can be unapologetically positive and forward-looking.

Let's not deny that death is inevitable; rather, let's choose to be happy and embrace life – and death – to the full. ●

CUTS

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