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Till next time

Even the heavens weep for one good heart.

So ... here I stand, while the heavens weep, my friend. I'm looking at your coffin ... down there in the grave, waiting to be covered.

Waiting for that last, terrible goodbye.

But I know you, my friend. And I will *never* say goodbye.

I'll settle for a 'see you later' or something along those lines, because you, of all furs, are not gone.

I remember the first time I met you. Right now, I remember all the time we spent together, and God almighty knows, that was a lot of time.

Not enough though.

Never enough.

But the first time, I'll always recall particularly clearly. You were different then, in every conceivable way. I remember when your father brought a special cake to my parents

home in Denver. It was for my birthday, and it was a beautiful creation. With lots of decorations on it. Real marzipan, sugar-flowers, frosting ...

It was a gorgeous cake and it seemed almost wrong to cut it and start eating it. I remember ... because I wasn't all that old and because your father's cake was probably the biggest I had ever seen.

I also remember that you were there. You were holding your dad's paw, with your rucksack on your back, biting your lips and looking very frightened, while you waited for the grownups to stop talking. I remember how you tried to hide behind your dad when my father looked at you. Even then, you were afraid of him, and with good reason.

I was too.

Your dad was always the best of males, my friend. He always saw the best in furs, and maybe ... just maybe he was a little slow to see the bad in them. Even when it was obvious ... as it was with my father.

I remember how that cake made us friends. Because my father was so impressed by your dad's work that he made a call to the school I attended to make sure you could go there as well. It was very expensive but ... it was part of the deal. My father paid for your tuition, and your dad would set aside any order, any request, any holiday ... anything at all ... if my father needed pastries or bread for some social event or other.

Your father loved you enough that he accepted that deal.

For your sake.

I think you knew. And I think that's why it hurt you so deeply when you broke his heart. And why it was so important to you to mend it again.

But you never actually told me.

It happened so many years ago anyway.

But not enough.

And now the heavens weep for one good heart ... lost to us all.

My tears are mixing with the raindrops and I'm doing *nothing* to stop them. Because someone wise once told me that grief was natural. That being upset and crying was the only right thing to do, because to try to be stoic about it was disrespectful to the deceased.

You know who told me that?

You did.

Like you told me so many other wise things. You always said that given the choice between wisdom and intelligence, you'd go for wisdom any day of the week. Lizzy always joked that you had both in ample supplies.

She was right, you know.

You could have made the rest of us look stupid, but instead, you always managed to pull us up along with you. From the time when we ended up in the same class in school. Even then. Even in elementary school, you were a cut above the rest of us. I remember how some of the other kids used to sneer at you for not being from a high class family. I remember how they used to taunt you, or talk behind your back. It didn't stop until I came out in your defense, and then it only stopped because they were all afraid of my father. But at least it stopped.

And you know ... what I remember the most about that was how you still helped them with their homework. Even though you knew they looked down on you. Even though you knew they'd probably never change their opinion of you. You still helped them.

I didn't understand then.

I guess I still don't.

But that's how you were. You loved to help others. You wanted others to excel all around you ... even though you hated yourself so intensely. At least you did then.

Thankfully, that changed somewhat later in life.

I remember one class. I think it was home ec of all things, and Cassandra had just tossed her frying pan and omelet at the door because it wouldn't come out right. You quietly picked it up, washed it off, mixed her a new batch while quietly explaining what you were doing ... and while she made a near-perfect omelet, you cleaned up the mess by the door. The teacher didn't tell you to ... you just did it.

And yet I know how you struggled with your own temper. How much anger and rage you had pent up inside you. I saw it come out when you thought no one was looking. I saw you beating the walls in the gym, kicking trees surrounding the school when everyone was looking elsewhere. Back then, I didn't understand it. I know it got even more confusing the first time you did lose your temper in front of others. I remember how it

frightened the other children, who had thought you could just be pushed over ... how you could be treated like their private chew-toy if I wasn't around to protect you. And then one day you lost it completely. I remember how you smashed a blackboard and broke a table.

I remember how your family was informed that unless they managed to control you, you'd be thrown out of school.

I also remember how my father made sure that wouldn't happen.

Sadly ... I also remember how your dad tried to control you, and I remember the black eye you turned up with in school the next day. You wouldn't talk about it ... not then, but I knew. And I was right ... as you told me later.

Your father was a good male, my friend ... but he shouldn't have hit you. Not then. Nor the other times.

I think it was his only real flaw. And I know how much it pained him and how sincerely and deeply he regretted ever doing it, later in life. I just don't think he knew what else to do.

The heavens still weep. And I'm wet through.

I don't care.

I don't want to leave. I don't want to walk away from this hole in the ground. I don't want to say "goodbye".

So I'm standing here, in my own thoughts, reminiscing ... while the bottom of the grave is slowly turned into mud.

Wake up, my friend. Wake up and tell me it's all been a bad dream.

But of course you won't.

Not this time. Not like ... not like that time when you found me at home before my birthday. God almighty, I was such a mess then. I wanted to die. I didn't think I had anything to live for. Imagine that? If you hadn't arrived then, all these fantastic things wouldn't have happened to me. I wouldn't have gotten married. Kalen wouldn't have been born. I wouldn't have had this incredible, unbelievable and wonderful life.

I owe the fact that I had the chance to make that life for myself all to you ... and yet, I couldn't repay you the favor in the end.

Does that make me a bad friend? I hope not. I don't think it does.

I would have if I could, and you know that ... you *know* that.

It was such a bad night too. I was sure my life was ... at an end. That nothing I did could change it, that I was doomed to a loveless, humorless life as the trophy wife of some wife-abusing scumbag with aspirations for grand crime.

The whole thing was surreal. I was raised in the household of a criminal mastermind ... I should have grown up the model image of my father's will. But I read. I looked at those who had less than me and wondered why that was right and fair. I knew what my father told me. That they were too weak to take what they needed for themselves ... but these were furs like your parents, who worked hard but just didn't have big contracts with my father.

Were they not good furs too?

It didn't make sense to me, and so it had to be wrong. So it had to be *wrong*.

And now I was being groomed to a marriage like the one my mother had. So I cut my wrists. I shouldn't have. But I did.

Fortunately, I didn't know how to, so I cut across instead of along my arms. I'd still have bled to death, mind you ... if you hadn't arrived. You were the only friend I was allowed to see anyway ... probably because my father thought you weren't 'dangerous'. A different species ... and so much lower on the social ladder than me, that he saw no risk in letting you come to visit, so long as he didn't have to actually sit down and have a conversation with you himself, the filthy snob. When you got there, I had toppled a glass of water by accident, and I couldn't pick it up because my fingers were numb. It thinned out the blood on the table and it made everything look a lot more dramatic than it was. Although admittedly, if you had arrived a few minutes later, I might not have been here today. Because of the mixed water and blood, the whole table was a mess. But you ... you understood exactly why I couldn't go to the hospital. So you didn't say anything. You just took off your shirt and tore it up, using it to bandage my arms. Then you sat there with me ... all night long, just talking. I know you got in trouble with your parents when you got home for it, too. I know they were angry that you hadn't come home at ten as was the deal.

I saw the black eye when I got back to school a few days later.

So I know you didn't tell them why you had stayed with me. You lied for me ... to keep me safe.

I had lied about feeling sick. I was almost never sick. I didn't want to stay home. Every minute I could spend in school was a minute spend away from my father. So they believed me. I was pale and shivering too, so no one questioned why I stayed tucked under the quilts. I told them I felt like I had the flu coming on, and Watson brought me hot drinks all day long. I never drank them with him in the room.

You had cleaned the blood up magnificently. No one ever suspected a thing.

Even the smell of blood was taken care of. I used to have this incense burner in the room. It stank up a storm but I thought it was so cool. You could have killed the stench in an abattoir with the stuff ... so no one smelled the blood.

I wonder what the last thing you smelled was.

I wonder about that, as I stand here, shivering as I shivered that day in bed, lying to hide the fact I had cut my wrists.

So you saved my life.

You were a good friend. The *best* friend.

You were more family than my family.

I loved you.

I still do.

And that is why I still won't leave the edge of your grave. Why I still can't believe what has happened. How swift it was. Or how wrong.

You saw enough wrong in your life. You dealt with it ... every day, for so many years. Alone. So horribly alone, probably more truly alone than I can even imagine. And then you trusted me. Then one day ... you trusted me. I don't know why you picked me to confide in. I know we were best friends, but I also know how frightened you were to lose me. There must have been others. There must have been ... although, come to think of it, I am not sure there was. Sometimes, I think you had no more friends than me in this world.

What a pair of misfits we were.

The day you told me, I wasn't sure what to make of it all. I remember how confused I had been for a while. I mean, there were plenty of boys trailing after me in school, and ... well ... I hate to say this, knowing what I know now, but there were a few girls who sent long looks after you, by then. No one spoke of your heritage anymore. Of your family.

And then one day after school, you stayed in the classroom. You hadn't said a word since that morning. Not even when the teacher had asked you, and that was entirely unusual. I think they were so confused that they didn't even question what was going on. You had sat there, all day, staring into empty space. Once or twice, I think I saw you look out the window. At first, I thought you'd fallen for someone. You know ... silly in love and all that. Like teenagers are wont to be. But that idea faded once I saw the agony in your eyes. Oh you tried to hide it. You tried to look like you were just deep in thought. I'm sure that to everyone else, you succeeded. No teacher stayed after school to talk to you, after all.

I was the only one who did so, in fact. So you told me what was wrong. You told me what had always been wrong. I mean, it wasn't like we never spoke of problems. We often did. I confided in you a lot during those years and vice versa. But every time you told me of something you had a problem with, it felt as if you were holding something back. Something massive. Something you didn't even know how to put words on yourself yet. And then ... that day after school ... it all came together. It all made such perfect sense.

I suddenly understood why you were so easy to relate to. So easy to talk to. Because you were just like me inside. Because inside ... there was someone trying to get out, and I just hadn't seen it.

What else could I do?

I hugged you.

And then you broke down and wept. For God's sake, I don't think I've seen or heard anyone cry like that since ... well ... ever.

Except maybe the furs you leave behind now that you're no longer with us.

So you told me that day. You even found the right word for it. And I swore I wouldn't tell anyone until you did. I kept that promise, because if I hadn't ... I would not have been your friend, and if there was one thing I am proud to say I was ... it was your friend.

Your parents didn't understand what was going on, because you didn't tell them. Not until after I had arranged for a place for us to live. My father, of course, gave me all kinds of Hell about it, but I managed to convince him, basically by lying. I can't even remember the lies I told him ... but they were many and they were convincing. I think one of them was that I wanted an education ... because an educated wife would be more useful to a future husband. Of course, I enrolled at college for exactly two days. I didn't tell him I'd dropped out until almost a year later. By then, I had a job at a condom-factory. It was the world's worst job. The stench was unbearable and the boss was even worse. But I had to ... because you needed to get away from your parents to find yourself. To fix yourself, somehow.

Of course, once your parents found out the truth, they discontinued all contact with you. Your father wept. Your mother called you a ... a ...

No, I won't even think that word. I know how much you despised it, and with good reason.

So suddenly, you were even more alone, but at least you were honest towards yourself. You got yourself enrolled as well, and you got a job at the university library ... and spent all the money you had left over every month on psychiatric evaluation. Oh, and your first bottle of pills, although I know you didn't have the prescription for them. I guess you got them at ... what was that place called again where we used to go?

Satyr.

That's right. Satyr. I guess you found someone there who could help you.

Buying prescription drugs from black market dealers. God almighty you were that desperate. And you couldn't afford it, either, but you did it anyway.

I swore I'd find the money to help you get your dream, my friend, and in the end, I succeeded. Although to be completely honest, I don't think either of us had expected it to happen the way it did. Even now ... standing here in the rain, while the other mourners pass slowly by behind me, I almost smile at the memory. If it wasn't because it was you down there in the coffin, I'd be laughing out loud simply thinking about those days.

And I was so scared then. I was terrified. My father had had enough. Tried to kidnap me, tried to get me back home to have me married off to some up-and-coming star on the black firmament of Denver criminality. I would have died if that had happened, but ... fortunately, I had a new job, and a new boss.

The Bosslady changed both our lives, didn't she?

For the better. She managed to pull you out of a suicidal downward emotional spiral all by herself. Simply by not letting you get depressed in her presence. She just wouldn't let you. She kept saying all the right things ... all the things I had said for so long as well but which no longer had the same weight coming from me. Because I had said them so often.

And because she was ... well ... because she was the Bosslady. International sex-icon, world famous for her awesome looks ... and she wasn't shying away from you. I think maybe then, for the first time in your life, you began to believe that some furs would accept you for who you were. I think *she* taught you that, more than anything else. More than *anyone* else.

She was the right dose of medicine at the right time and the right place. You were so far gone, my friend, I feared I would come home and find you dead in the shower any day. Seriously, I thought I would. Every day, I dreaded putting the key into the door-lock. I called out your name first thing, and on the few occasions when you didn't answer because you were out, the first thing I'd do would be to rush to the bathroom to see if you were there ...

Thank God you never were.

And yet, I guess God finally decided your time was up. And I swear to you, I swear on the life of my son who is the most precious thing in my life, that when I get to the Pearly Gates, I'll have some *serious* words saved up for the Almighty for it! How *dare* He?!

But the Bosslady ... she's something else, isn't she? I mean, she hired me first, and on the thinnest possible grounds.

And then ... she gave *you* a job too. Proofreading a script and then rewriting it. I always knew she was fantastic at talent-spotting, but in all honesty, that was the crown jewel of her career in that respect. All the fantastic stars and starlet's she's discovered in the strangest places over the years have added up to an amazing collection, but what she did for you was something else. What she did was to give you something you never believed you could have.

She gave you hope.

I will always be grateful to her for that. I remember how you began to change. Alright, that started even before she actually hired you, that night when we went to the first party

I attended at the Studio. You were so scared all the way there, and all it ended up doing for you was to introduce you to the male of your life. Such is the ironies of life, my friend. If you had succeeded in convincing me to let you stay at home that night, all these fantastic things might never have happened to you. I would never have come to know your children ... and you would never have had the chance to fulfill your greatest dream.

To be a mother.

You were damned good at it, too.

If you ever doubted it, the tears of your family, now mixing with the rain should tell you all you need to know.

Esteban was a fantastic stroke of luck. He's been so good for you, all these years. I know that deep down, you never stopped doubting yourself. Even with all the success you were met with, you still kept doubting yourself. Your own value, your skills, your talents. You never thought you did quite well enough, silly though that may be. Most furs didn't see it. Most furs thought you were an icon of self confidence these last many years of your life, but I knew you better than most. I knew your signals. I knew how you'd look down or away and how your lips went tight when self-blame raced through your head. I knew the haunted look in your eyes when those awful voices in the back of your head came back to berate or belittle you.

You fought those voices all your life, my friend ... and you know what?

You beat them.

Consistently.

You proved them wrong again and again, and I think that was one of your greatest achievements. Because in reality, you were fighting yourself ... every day of your life ... and despite that, you ended up being a good fur. A truly good, decent fur.

God how I'll miss you.

I'll miss laughing with you. I'll miss having somewhere to go when the world sucks and looks like it's been designed solely to annoy me. I'll miss being able to just sit down on your couch with a cup of tea, knowing that in half an hour, you'll have somehow managed to explain everything to me in a way that makes it all more logical and bearable. After half an hour, I'd probably be laughing at myself.

That's just one of hundreds of things I'll miss about you.

I'll be lost for a while without you there. You've always been there. But you also showed me that even when feeling lost, a fur can find his or her way. You showed me that more than anyone I've ever known, and I'm going to find my way, until we meet again.

Even when you moved in with Esteban, we didn't really move away from one another. Things changed ... certainly they did. But it was no less warm and no less wonderful. When it got serious with me and Yohni, and with you and Esteban, we stayed as close as we'd always been. I mean ... we had a double marriage for goodness sake.

Yeah, I know, I know. We didn't really get *legally* married until the marriage-laws were made gender-neutral, but we both know that was just a technicality.

And now we're here. At this cemetery, and when some of us leave, we leave you behind. It makes every bit of my soul scream and protest to do that. I can't leave you behind. I can't *leave* you.

I want to scream at the universe for being this bloody unfair. You weren't old enough to die like that. You had so much life left to live, but I guess that wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Sometimes, things just don't go the way we planned.

Like with your Ph.D. not leading to a job at your Alma Mater. I know the head of your department put up a stink about that, but the money just wasn't there. But it just goes to show how things usually turned out alright anyway, because that just meant you got a job in San Francisco instead.

Yohni and I were happy that you and Esteban were still there. That way we didn't start out completely from scratch in the Castro, socially. We'd lived there a while and sure, we had other friends by then but it meant a lot to us when you and Esteban moved to the Bay Area. Even if I teased you about how it seemed like a vixen was stalking me through life.

I remember you retorted, rather dryly, that you seemed to be unable to escape being surrounded by porn-stars no matter where you moved.

Touché.

One-Nil to you.

Or more precisely, Two-One. I remember how I visited with Kalen in tow, a few days after you and Esteban adopted Charles and Frances. We were all rather nervous about whether they'd get along. Neither Charles, nor Frances, spoke a word of English at first. But children never needed language to play and get along. They were nervous around each other for all of five seconds, then Frances tossed a ball towards Kalen and he caught it, laughed, and tossed it back.

And then they were playing like the best of friends ... all three of them.

I don't think you've ever glowed so much as you did that day. You really loved those kids from the moment you laid eyes on them.

I think you were happy your parents got to be grandparents, too.

Even if they didn't get to be for that many years.

When your mother died ... you seemed to know it wouldn't be long before your father followed suit. They were too closely knit. And you were right. He wasted away and within a year ... you and Esteban had to arrange a second funeral. Charles and Frances were ten years old then. At least your mom and dad got several years in which to spoil the kids. But you were dazed after the second funeral. Like someone had punched you. Hard.

You had lost your parents once already ... only to get them back. Not so this time, and you knew it. You had effectively had to go through losing your family twice. How the Hell you managed to cope with it, I'll never know.

But I wish I knew.

So I could use some of that knowledge now ... to cope with losing you.

Because we're family. Not blood-relations ... but *family*.

Family sticks up for one another. Laughs with each other, loves each other, supports one another. You always knew that and always did so. How many games did you and Esteban miss during Kalen's first football year? Not many. One or two, and it was always because of work. He's your nephew ... and he always looked up to you as his aunt. And now ... he's trying to make a career for himself out of his sport. He's had the worst run of bad luck and now he's out of a contract after this season. And what's that going to do for him? He's never been a starter, and he is worried sick that his career is at an end before it's even gotten off the ground.

And all he'd ever have to do to get a bit of hope back was call you or visit you.

And your couch.

Have a cup of tea.

And half an hour later, he'd feel just as I did, that his worries and problems were not nearly as severe as he had thought and that there would always be a solution to it all.

"She told me that even if my career is over, I've got a good education to fall back on, but that I shouldn't worry about not getting a new contract, because she was sure somehow things would work out for me."

That's what he told me ... over and over and over again, last time he came home to visit. So I know you talked to him about it.

You'd have liked Vishalya. I didn't get to meet her until today, but she's a lovely, lovely young lady. I think he's really found the love of his life this time. She's got a good head on her shoulders and he can't stop smiling whenever she's in the room. He keeps tripping over his own words when he's talking about her, too.

Hmm ... that reminds me of Esteban, many years ago right after he met you.

You know, I hope my son will find love the way you and Esteban did. I think he has this time. I like Dina a lot. She's a great young lady, but it wasn't working out with them in the end and more than anything I'm proud of them both for realizing that and ending it in such a good way.

But Vishalya ... ?

He's just head over hooves, my friend. Head over hooves.

He keeps sprouting bad poetry about her, too.

It's really quite endearing.

It's like when he met Dina. That summer ... that dreadful summer. We all remember that all too clearly, and yet, it became such a positive, formative experience for the kids. Isn't that amazing? That they took all that fear and uncertainty, and turned it into something positive.

It's not even that many years ago.

But for me ... and knowing you, I'd say for you as well, it didn't end until a year ago, when Leo called us all to tell us that Benjamin Aureus had finally died. That he'd been

cremated and his ashes strewn over some non-descript place so there would be no gravestone for his ilk to come pay their 'respects' at.

I think until then, we all still had that nagging fear, however irrational it might have been. But then ... it was truly over.

Leo is here too, you know, with Lizzy and Nadia. And Miriam and Fox are here, and William and Emma.

All the Society of Nerdy Femmes have turned up.

SNF Forever, wasn't that your rallying call?

You were such a geek sometimes. It was one of the best things about you, that even after you became really successful, and even after you got published, you were still the same. You could still get started on some historical lecture if someone accidentally pushed the right button.

I won't say the wrong one because at least your lectures were fun and interesting.

Your students said the same thing. I guess that's why so many of them turned up today. I guess that's why two different student organizations sent flowers for the funeral. Both from California and from Ohio. Isn't that something? You influenced so many furs ... and I don't even think you were always conscious of it. Or maybe you were.

I can't remember who it was, but I remember that you told me one of your friends had once said you forced everyone to take a stance and have an opinion simply by being you.

That friend was right.

But you could have turned away everyone you came into contact with if you had stayed bitter and resentful of the world, or if you had kept pitying yourself. Instead, you chose to live by a simple lesson your father always preached ... even to me.

"A good argument never changed anyone's opinion. A good example, however, might."

Your father was a wise fur, my friend, and I'm sure you and he are already reminiscing, wherever you are now.

Yohni is here ... next to me. She just arrived. She's been crying. A lot. She slips her arm under mine and leans her head against my shoulder, sniffing, trying to find the right words. Instead, like me, she chooses silence.

Her shoes are ruined by the rain and the mud. She doesn't even notice. I'll probably have to serve her hot drinks for a few days, to help her get over a cold. But she doesn't want to just leave either.

You know, today reminds me of graduation day. Both of them, such as it is. Charles was valedictorian ... and so was Steve, a year later. They both had to give speeches ... and on both days, for some reason it started raining. Two years in a row, it rained on graduation day. Many of the parents couldn't get out of there quickly enough, but not you. You and Esteban ... me and Yohni ... we were wet through weren't we? But we were so proud. I think it says a lot about you that you were just as proud when Steve had given his speech as you were when Charles and Frances graduated.

And I remember how happy you were when he called you 'mom' the first time.

He's a good guy. He really is. You did a good job on him, you and Esteban. Gave him direction.

I think maybe ... in a small way ... you were paying it forwards. Zig Zag gave you hope long ago, and with Steve, you passed it on to someone else.

He's standing right across the grave from me now. He looks ... like someone has torn out his heart. His eyes are red and puffy ... his paws are trembling. I hope you can see him, where you are. That's what losing someone you love will do.

He loved you, my friend. As did I. As did Yohni. As did everyone who is here today.

Esteban is here too. Charles and Frances are on either side of him. They just got done saying goodbye to the preacher. I know you were never religious, but ... a funeral is a funeral.

Zig Zag once told me that you had rocked her world when we were filming in Virginia. She said you had been talking about faith, and she had asked you how come you weren't a religious fur. She told me she had felt that in your position ... as it was then ... you might have needed faith more than most. That it might have been something firm to hold on to.

You looked at her when she asked why you didn't believe in God and just asked her "Would you?"

But I know you believed in the existence of the soul. Not in a Christian sense. You certainly never believed in God, and I respect that. But you told me ... more than once ... that you were sure there was something more to life than was quantifiable. That there

was something after death. What it was, you didn't know. All you were sure of was that the existing religions all got it wrong.

Maybe you're right ...

But I know this is not 'goodbye'. So I still won't say it.

Esteban has just broken down again. Charles has to support him. He can't bear to look at the grave for long but he can't bring himself to leave either. I don't know how he's going to deal with this. I know he will have support, though. I just don't know if it'll be enough.

I don't know if any amount of support would really be enough.

You didn't get enough time, my friend. Enough time to see all your potential come to fruition, but somehow, I think you expected that you wouldn't grow to ripe old age. You told me so, once or twice. I guess I didn't want to listen to it, so I zoned out ... just nodded and said something empty-headed. But I think you knew. I wonder if you could feel yourself grow frail and you simply hid it from all of us so you wouldn't worry us? Or if it really came as a bolt of lightning.

I believe the latter. You would not have kept us guessing. You were not the type. If you had been sick, you'd have told us so we would have had time to get used to the thought. So we could have prepared ourselves, somehow.

And most importantly, you would have made preparations yourself.

You didn't. So it must have come as a surprise to you too.

You were good at that, you know. Preparations. When you called me to tell me that you and Esteban were moving back to Ohio, I thought you were cracking a joke. I mean, you had moved away from there to get away from the petty, small-minded bigotry you still faced. I guess in a way you just realized that you'd meet that no matter where you went in the world. That it wouldn't be possible to outrun it ... only to rise above it.

And damned ... did you ever?

Becoming head of the history-department at your Alma Mater ... Good grief, you didn't do things halfway did you? Instead, you put yourself in a position where furs would have to deal with you ... where they couldn't move around you or try to ignore that you were there. Maybe it was your own private little rebellion.

I think just maybe you missed some of all the furs you had come to know in Ohio as well. I know Zig Zag and James were very happy that you and Esteban went back there. Marvin as well.

And you didn't let the scandal factor bother you either. You, a member of the faculty board of humanities at your university, being seen in the company of a former and a present porn director. I can only imagine how you snickered the first time someone got started on the immorality thereof. There was a die-hard rebel hiding just underneath your fur, you know. Someone who openly told the world to take all its antiquated morals and shove it. You told me ... so many times ... that one of the great pleasures of your life was to watch some moronic bigot nearly choke on his or her tongue simply from being in your immediate presence.

You never stopped being the 'good example', my friend.

To your children.

Your husband.

Your friends.

To me ...

To everyone who came into contact with you.

But you also knew you couldn't convince everyone. You just stopped being bothered by it at some point. Somewhere, it went from a notion that you had to convince absolutely everyone ... to saying that furs had to make up their own minds, and if they chose to still be hateful, bigoted and willfully narrow-minded, then it was their life ... and their loss. You knew you had the moral high ground, and that you were winning by not lowering yourself to their level.

I wonder why you never managed to translate that self-confidence into self-esteem.

You were such a dichotomy, you know.

A complete self-contradiction. Nearly everyone thought well of you ... liked you ... respected you ... even loved you. Except yourself. I really wonder why.

I hope now that you're rid of your mortal coil, that you'll finally understand why we all thought so highly of you, and why we're standing here in the rain, unable to walk away.

We didn't get to see each other much these last few years. Not face to face, anyway. Somehow a telephone call just isn't the same thing ... not even with high definition images to go along with the words. There is still that two second delay on what I say before you react to it, which makes it unlike an actual face-to-face conversation.

Besides, I can't sit down on your couch with a cup of tea over the phone. It just isn't the same thing.

It's not that we didn't meet. We did. Twice a year at least, but that's very different from twice or three times a week as it was when you still lived in San Francisco.

But you followed your dream. You somehow seemed to understand the fragility of life, and how important it was for you to follow your hopes and your dreams. Esteban supported you, every step of the way. In his line of work, moving from Hollywood to Ohio would normally be professional suicide, but fortunately, he's too good for the big studios not to hire. Plus there's the Bosslady in Ohio. I remember how she said she wanted to hire him to film for her again some day. She got the chance when you moved back.

I know she's grateful for that, but when I look at her now, across the grave, she looks like she'd give it all up if you'd just come back to us. Looking at Esteban ... I don't know how he's going to be able to go back to work.

I just don't know.

And without you here ... to sit down with me and explain the world to me in thirty minutes ... I'll have to figure it out for myself somehow. Or at least, those of us left behind have to figure it out between us, and we both know it'll never be the same.

We all lost something precious and irreplaceable when you died.

But at least it was swift. When I go, I hope it'll be as quickly as with you. The doctors said it hadn't been painful, and by God I hope they are right.

You were about to start a lecture. I know you ... there was nothing you loved more than that. All the bureaucracy of running the department was just something you had to deal with. What you really loved was teaching. Sharing that pool of information stored in your head with young furs, making them laugh ... shocking them ... making their throats constrict as you laid bare the gruesome facts of some dreadful past to them all.

They told us that you had come in and said good morning as you always did. You'd barely managed to get started on your lecture, though, before you'd blinked, like someone

had just startled you. You'd gone completely quiet. Then you had put down your laser-marker on the table, very slowly. The students said your paw was trembling as you did so. Then you had looked at them all and blinked again, then made a strange little noise, as if you were somehow saying you were sorry for not finishing the class ... and then you had collapsed on the floor. Three students who knew first aid had rushed to you and tried to help you. They had administered CPR but to no avail. You had been dead before you hit the ground.

From a massive ... massive brain hemorrhage. The doctors who investigated said you wouldn't have felt a thing. That the last thing that had happened to you while you were conscious, was that a whole heap of chemicals had been released from your brain into your body.

They said that in all likelihood, your life passed before your eyes, but you never felt a thing.

And that's how I know they were wrong.

If your life passed before your eyes ... you felt many, many things.

Happiness ... fear ... love ... loss ... joy.

I just hope at least you didn't feel pain.

I hope only the rest of us had to deal with that.

I'm going to have to leave, my friend. God knows I don't want to ever step away from this place, but I have no choice. The grave will get covered up ... but that's alright, because in reality, you're no longer down there. That soul you believed in has left your body, and all that remains is the physical detritus of a life so well ... and so nobly lived.

For all I know, you're standing right next to me, wondering what all the fuss is about.

That would be just like you, too.

That way, the last laugh would really be on you. But you'll have to excuse me this time ... if I don't laugh with you.

The pain in my chest is just far too awful.

The rain hides the fact that I've been crying my eyes out. That I'm still weeping.

But I won't say goodbye. Not even as I step back from the edge of the grave. Not even then. Not now, not *ever*.

There is no goodbye, because this is not the end.

If you ever taught me something, it is that there is always a reason to hope. That no matter how horrible life can be, it can somehow be turned around. It can be turned into something good and worthwhile. And 'goodbye' is hopeless and final. It is not only not you. It is anti-you.

So I'll settle for hope ... and say I hope you'll sleep well until I meet you again. I hope you'll be well, wherever you are, and that you'll pop in once in a while to check up on us, even if we can't see you or hear you. If you'll promise to do that, I promise I'll come back here as often as I can, too ... to have a cup of tea, even if I have to bring the thermos myself, and spend thirty minutes with you, even though there's no couch ... but knowing that somewhere, you'll still be telling me how the work really works, and why it's not so hopeless.

I promise you that ... as I walk away from your grave.

Till next time ... Jean Lebrun