



Love at the Hollywood Bowl

By Henry Juhala

Once upon a time, back in the 80s when I was living in Hollywood, I talked some friends into letting me use their box seats at an outdoor concert in The Hollywood Bowl. I put together the most fantastic picnic. It was complete with chocolate-covered strawberries, champagne, linen table settings, a silver candelabra and a book of poetry as a gift for my friend Bob (not his real name). Bob already had his own set of season tickets to The Bowl. I met Bob there and lured him down to the box seats. My box-seat friends, in turn, took over his seats in the nose-bleed section. It was all very romantic -- at least I thought it was one of the most romantic things I had ever done.

Bob was someone I was beginning to have special feelings for. He likewise expressed some interest in me. I was sure there was chemistry between us. After the concert we went to his house and had a wonderful "chat". There was lots of laughter, lots of talk of favorite TV comedy sketches, and some reading from the book of poetry. It happened to be by one of Bob's favorite poets. We each selected a piece to read to the other. That was my suggestion. There was a special love poem I wanted Bob to hear. During the moment it all seemed very magical. I fully expected to give Bob a kiss at the end of the poem.

To my surprise, my hopes were dashed. I got the typical, yet subtle, brush-off (you all know what I mean). Bob said he was flattered and very interested. However, (oh no -- not the dreaded "however") for reasons he preferred not to have to explain, he couldn't pursue a relationship with me beyond the friendship we already enjoyed. There it was. There was no turning back. It was out in the open. I had just been given the "let's just be friends" speech. Having had similar brush-offs before, I could take a hint. Still, I remained perplexed by the chemistry I knew existed between us.

Time passed. We remained friends and even went to the Hollywood Bowl a couple of times later that summer. We also saw each other at church and a few social gatherings. Each time I sensed an increasing level of chemistry between us. And each time he seemed to make an even greater effort to keep our relationship purely platonic.

Eventually Bob disclosed he had AIDS. I started to understand why Bob kept his distance. It wasn't long before he was frequently in the hospital where he rejected my attempts to visit him. Between hospital visits, however, we did manage several dinners and movie nights at his home. A while later Bob passed away.

At the beginning of The Hollywood Bowl the next season, Lisa (a mutual friend of ours) called and said Bob left tickets in my name for a particular Hollywood Bowl event. Of course, I had no choice but to go. I met Lisa at The Bowl where she ushered me to our seats. In the empty seat next to mine there was a hat-sized, gift-wrapped box with my name on it. The wrapping looked very familiar. Bob had picked up a penchant of mine for wrapping gifts in colored comic strips from the Sunday paper and accenting it with ribbon and origami. Inside was a long, tear-stained thank you note and some mementos I recognized from the year earlier. There was the program from that first night together, the ribbons I used as napkin rings, the cork from the champagne, etc. It also included the book of poetry I gave him and other things he wanted me to have. I knew how important each of the enclosed personal effects were to him. Among other things, there was his favorite Mickey Mouse watch, a rustic-framed picture of his first dog, shells we collected together at the beach and a cassette tape mix of classical piano music. I was touched beyond measure that he thought to give them to me. That he saved each of the items from the picnic was icing on the cake.

In the note Bob shared how much he did have feelings for me and wanted so much to express them at each of our nights together at the Hollywood Bowl. Because he already knew he only had a short time to live, he felt he couldn't possibly inflict the kind of suffering on me that he knew was ahead for him. Instead, he kept his feelings and his love to himself. He and I had already lost far too many friends to AIDS. He saw how emotional I got with each one -- particularly seeing dear friends in so much pain at the end of their lives. As such, rather than get closer to me, Bob felt he needed to distance himself and not let romance take its course.

In its place, Bob kept and cherished the mementos of our Hollywood Bowl night together. As he got more and more sick, Bob withdrew farther and farther away. Had we gotten together there is no question I would have supported him to the end. As I look back on it now, he was probably wise not to make me go through all that. He suffered horrifically during his last hospital visit. I would have been a basket case having to deal so personally with him.

I was often angry at him thinking he selfishly cut me out of his life at a time when all I wanted was to celebrate life with him. In reality I know it was a very sacrificing and selfless act of love on his part. You know, I appreciate him sparing me. I know that sounds selfish on my part. It is also true. I was barely surviving having to deal with so many other dear friends suffering from AIDS -- none of whom I was ever romantically involved with. At that point, I am not sure I could have emotionally survived losing someone I was intimate with -- particularly if I had to endure their pain and suffering with them.

For him to take the forethought that he did before he passed away, and set up the latter night at the Hollywood Bowl, was one of the most romantic and precious things anyone has ever done for me. For him to sacrifice any self-

fulfilling romantic interest he may have had in me, in order to save my emotions down the road, was an even more awesome thing to do. Because of the deep intensity of it all, I keep trying to put it in the farthest corners of my memory. Yet, regardless of how hard I try, I could never ever forget it -- not in a million years.

NOTE: Other creative work by the author can be found on this Facebook creativity blog "BETWEEN THE CLOSET & THE LOOKING GLASS":
http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=228343112826#!/pages/Between-The-Closet-The-Looking-Glass/192998414372

Some of the author's poetry can also be found in "Sanctified - An Anthology of Poetry by LGBT Christians." Check out a review of "Sanctified" at <http://chromajournal.blogspot.com/2009/07/review-sanctified-anthology-of-poetry.html#links>.