

Tess and Vid juggling
at Henley Festival, 2011

“His death taught me how to live”

Six weeks after my boyfriend died, I stood on stage, balanced a plastic urn containing his ashes on my head, and did a juggling trick. There was palpable suspense from the audience. Stunned silence when his urn fell and I caught it, two inches from the floor, in both hands as if cradling a baby. Then an eruption of applause. He always encouraged me to do things that had never been done before, so performing that was just what he would have wanted.

If it wasn't love at first sight when I first met Vid, it was definitely instant intrigue. It was June 2010, and we were both booked to perform at Eden Festival in Dumfries, Scotland. Amid the fields and festival-goers in wellies he wore a suit and carried a briefcase. He was

Can you really turn losing the love of your life into something laugh out loud and life-affirming? Tess Cartwright explains how she did just that

As told to JULIE McCAFFREY

a beatboxer and his briefcase contained a harmonica, recorder and juggling balls. He broke the hip-hop stereotype of beatboxing by having his own style, and I was enthralled.

That evening, Vid joined my group of friends around the campfire until the small hours. He was 21 years old, and had played at 15 different festivals that summer, hitchhiking alone to each one. His strong morals and ethics meant passionate ►

discussions always happened around him. We were all attracted to him.

I lived in Sheffield and Vid in Bristol, so we stayed in contact with texts, and a month later I visited him. He made me lunch but used too much chilli, so I did that terribly polite British thing of tearfully eating and insisting it was delicious.

We had a long-distance courtship, so had the thrill of killer dates then the ache of missing each other. Vid urged me to leave my circus admin job to pursue my love of performing. "Leap and a net will appear," was his phrase.

Months later, we toured Canada, the US and China with *Beatrick*, a show we devised together, combining my clowning skills with his musical talent and a shared love of juggling. One night, we'd gig at a high school where no one showed up, the next, a packed village hall.

It was an intense four months that tested us in all ways. Vid's age made car insurance pricey, so I did all the driving in a bog-standard rental, often for 12 hours a day, from the top of British Columbia to San Francisco. Being

"I could see from the doctor's eyes that she'd been crying"



in a car together for so long, sharing a stage and friends' sofas each night was both exhausting and exhilarating. And it made us strong.

Back in the UK, in March 2012 we moved in together in Bristol. I learnt balloon artistry and Vid was so patient as I filled our flat with squeaking and popping. We were a solid couple, and when we envisioned our future we saw each other and a family.

But in January Vid's symptoms began to show. He'd sleep for up to 16 hours a day and thought the bleak, rainy winter had wiped him out with seasonal affective disorder. Then his face developed a slope to one side. He denied anything was wrong, and his GP dismissed his symptoms as side effects of beatboxing.

Vid was at the peak of his career, travelling the world, earning £500 for five minutes on stage and working on an album. He wasn't willing to engage with being ill. So he kept going, even though he was clearly very sick.

By May, Vid had blinding headaches that made him vomit and his sense of smell was awry. Researching the symptoms online always had the same conclusion: brain cancer. I was off-the-scale stressed. I kept telling Vid something could be seriously wrong, but he'd just say, "I'm fine. It'll be fine."

When I came home one day to him screaming and writhing on the floor with the pain of a headache, I regret not being as comforting as I should have. I told him he had to go to the doctor immediately or it was over. I was done with arguing when he was so clearly unwell. He refused to let me call an ambulance and insisted we cycle up a massive hill to the GP surgery.

I sobbed through his list of symptoms and begged the GP to believe he was not the same ►

person any more. Vid rolled his eyes, said I was being dramatic, but agreed to go for a scan. I felt sick, scared and desperately hopeful in the hospital waiting room. Vid chatted about his performance that night, desperately trying to cheer us up.

During his scans, the young doctor reminisced with Vid about her favourite festivals. But when she came to tell him the results, her demeanour had changed. She stiffened and looked more formal. I could see from her eyes she had been crying. The scan was not OK. My healthy-eating boyfriend, who didn't drink alcohol or caffeine, smoke or do drugs, had three brain tumours. Time slowed to a crawl. The doctor's voice sounded like an underwater echo. Vid's expression remained unchanged. I felt my face contort and shoulders rise as I wept in tumultuous waves. The doctor kept her focus on Vid. He stayed calm, insisted he would still perform that evening and asked me to bring him his suit and briefcase. He was brave and I was a blubbing mess.

Surgery the very next day relieved Vid's symptoms, and for a glorious five days he was himself again. But at the next appointment, a consultant we hadn't seen before sat us down and detailed his schedule of operations, chemo and radiotherapy. The consultant hadn't realised no one had told us Vid's tumours were cancerous.

Googling the jagged names of tumours while he spoke was a complete clusterfuck. They were terminal. He had a 10% chance of living more than two years.

During Vid's next op, his mum waited in hospital, beading a necklace to keep calm, and I went into a field of daisies nearby with my friend Amy and bawled. Surgeons operated on a delicate part of Vid's brain and warned he could emerge paralysed on one side. And that's what happened. It left Vid in a wheelchair for most of the time from then on. He did manage to teach himself to walk with a stick after six months, but towards the end of his life he was again confined to a wheelchair.

My guilt was overwhelming. I thought back to snapping at him over traffic in Toronto. Telling him off for his smirk, unaware his face was beginning to slope. Making digs because he slept so much. But Vid didn't want me to be down. That was hard. Often impossible. He told me I could be sad when he was dead. He didn't want people's pity or to carry their pain. He didn't want anyone tilting their heads, sighing and telling him they



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were sorry. Lots of people drifted away, but a core of friends remained and propped us up.

Just before his 25th birthday, in July 2014, scans showed the cancer was growing, and Vid started to lose his speech. That's when he knew he didn't have much time. My 30th birthday followed months later. At the age when many couples contemplate marriage, we were writing his final wishes. But if a successful relationship ends when 'death us do part', we had one.

Throughout everything, Vid never became sad. He always said humour was the most powerful tool to defuse tension. He said whenever you laugh, that moment becomes memorable. He was right. So we laughed a lot and that made some people uncomfortable. Vid would joke, "What's the worst that could happen - I die?" He'd say, "Tess, I won't haunt you. But when you move on..." And we giggled when someone bought him a calendar for Christmas.

We packed as much fun, conversation and colour into his last months as we possibly could. We visited friends in Bulgaria, stayed in beautiful Airbnbs, travelled to Madagascar (which was Vid's dream), watched movies, ➤

had great sex. The Penny Brohn charity taught us coping techniques using meditation, massage and nutrition, which were invaluable.

In January 2015, we organised a huge goodbye party. Vid was still able to form sentences, albeit slowly, and I listened intently to what he wanted. I gathered a planning committee and appointed friends in charge of décor, food, music and circus. I knew everyone would do everything they could to make it perfect. Together, we created a concert for 200 people in a warehouse to celebrate his life.

The most incredible high was walking into the space and seeing Vid look completely overwhelmed. The painful low was witnessing some people who hadn't seen him since his diagnosis treat him like there was no life in him any more. They spoke really loudly at him, steered clear of him or asked me if he knew what was going on. That left me despondent. But it was still an amazing party. There was a room of

joy, filled four-foot deep with balloons. And a place of absolute sorrow around a willow tree where people tied written memories of Vid to branches.

Less than two months later, that same tree was cremated with him.

I hadn't needed to be told he was gone. I knew. That night, I dreamt of being on a bus and seeing a little boy in the street fall and smash his head on the pavement. I started to scream and point but no one paid attention. The child then looked at me, winked at me, got up from the ground and ran away. I woke to a text from Vid's dad asking me to call.

Straight after his funeral, I drove to Ireland. Alone in a friend's country cottage for a week, I wept, screamed at the mountains, ate delicious food, smoked marijuana, drank wine and did a lot of writing.

I came back in a volatile state. I felt I'd inherited Vid's drive, and knew he'd hate it if I stayed at home crying. That's when I performed at the juggling convention.

In May, I started doing stand-up comedy about death. Some people thought it was brave, touching, funny and sad. But in LA and Belgium, it went down like a lead balloon. I didn't care. The pain of Vid dying was much worse than bombing on stage, and taking him up there with me was healing.

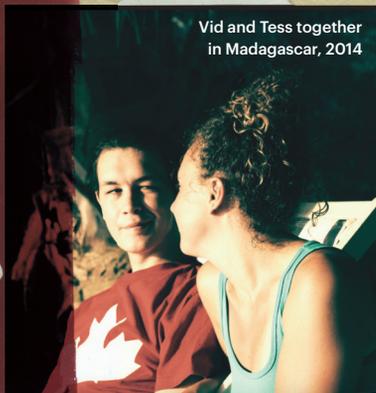
While the stand-up routine may not have been the right platform, I knew there was something powerful in expressing grief in an unexpected way. My thoughts evolved into a play, *Dying To Please You*, which exposes my painful emotions and also pokes fun at mortality. Performing it with my company is therapy for me and my audience. I am buoyed knowing it encourages difficult but important conversations about death. It's comforting to talk about Vid on stage, to see how he still makes people laugh and hear how, even now, he creates amazing discussions just as he did that first night around the campfire.

We were soulmates who were meant to meet and connect under special circumstances. I thought I'd cry every day for the rest of my life, but there are already days when I don't. Because Vid taught me that love is overflowing and no one has a finite amount.

So will I ever love again? I know so. ●

Tess and Vid were supported by Penny Brohn, a charity which helps people live well with cancer. pennybrohn.org.uk

"It's comforting to talk about Vid on stage"



Vid and Tess together in Madagascar, 2014