

Let Me Go

October 18, 1992, 5:20 AM:

The end of the world is Sunday morning. A young woman dies, strangled in her ransacked apartment. She was a heroin addict. She was of service to man. She was beautiful. She was my daughter. Yanne, acrobat of the heart. Yanne who walked the high wire, who plunged into the void to fill up a nothing. Yanne the strong. Yanne the fragile. Yanne, my difficult darling

You were there, in the early morning light, I was not. Despite that day, the sun continues to rise, I watch for it. I wait for the band of light to move across the photographs of that morning. I see the light. It is there. You are not. I feel so cold. Here my search begins. For meaning, not for certitude. Alone, I walk in absence. I'm looking for you, as I have always looked for you. Lost you and found you so many times since the day you were born. Premature, you rushed in, you threw me into turmoil. You impressed me with your urgency to be born, to be alive. Already I could hear your "Let me go, let me go, Mama." Were you forewarned that time would be so short? Yanne, my impetuous one. As a child, you reinvent games, you toss away the rules, you charge ahead without looking back. We find you on a railway, toddling towards infinity. You leap into the sea alive with jellyfish. You set free the kite I'm holding. "No, no Mama let it go, it wants to go further, it wants to fly away, don't hold it back. Don't hold me back Mama from my first love, he's a junkie, I want to save him. Let me go."

I mourn for you in black and white, in shifting shades of gray. Where light and shadow float together. The white glowing, lit from within, transparent. Uncomfortable here, I live in black and white. I'm in the dark and I try to see. I search for the light within, for reconciliation. In film, black and white often indicates the passage of time, of time passed. For me, time stopped with you. My shooting star.

I search all night for messages, signs and scents you might have left behind. I want to pass through the wall that hides your death from me. To hear and see the impossible. To arrive before it is too late. Alone, you braved that night of obscenity, overwhelmed by fear and horror. Alone with him, whom I shall never forgive the unforgivable. The man who took your life. Yanne, my life lost. Your death in my absence, violent and violating, this assassination of a life cannot be true. You will return, tonight or tomorrow. I'm waiting, my oh-so-living child. Nothing rests, nothing sleeps inside me. Your last cries resonate: "Let me go, please let me go." I remember the freshness of your body, your body assassinated, and I weep. War victims, children sacrificed for God and Country, die an honourable death. You died in the street, in shame and loathing, victim of an absurd war, a war lost. The war on drugs, which condemns and humiliates its victims while shielding the guilty ones.

A day that began like any other, Friday, October 23, around 3:00 PM. Two police officers arrive to speak the unspeakable. "Are you the mother of

your dead daughter?' No, I did not go to the morgue, yet you, you were there without my knowledge, a no-one, anonymous, during five long days and nights. How did I not die that day. I retraced your final steps. I looked for you, but you were not there. I must find you, I must look elsewhere, inside myself, around myself, in a landscape of futile hope, in the drift of your daze, in our dreams, in my memories. I will pass through the darkness keeping you from me. You will not return, I know that now. You will never return. Tonight. Or tomorrow. You died on a screen, my beloved.

Forgive me Father for I have sinned. I have known the agony of helplessness. Guilt consumes me like an abscess. Gone is my youth. Gone, blessed absolution. I remember our evening games on the hazel beaches of Cape Cod. I could still comfort you then, keep at bay the encroaching fog, by simply taking your hand in mine. If only I could have offered you a God. Not the God of fear and punishment, not the one who judges and condemns. Not the one who took you from me. No, I do not believe in that God. The one I'm seeking is the God of tolerance and love. The one who helps me wrestle with my hatred of your assassin, who has no right to live. Opposing the death penalty means choosing to respect life, even the life of him who does not deserve it. Opposing the death penalty means not allowing one's self to kill at all times. It means saying no to war, including the war on drugs. Yanne, my wild spirit, come back to offer me your forgiveness and receive mine. I could not stop you, nor steer you from harm's way. I would have had to shoulder your pain, to take your place before the ultimate horror. How could I have failed to rescue my most beloved amongst all women.

I entered your unknown world. I entered the fringe. I spent nights with street workers. I stopped by shelters, Pops's van. I saw doctors treating drug addicts without passing judgement. I saw doctors go into the street to treat them, while Emergency Rooms were turning them away. The streets, in direct contact with human suffering and frailty, have humanized those who go out there. And they, in turn, try to humanize the street, while coping with their own doubts and demons.

I knew and loved you day and night when you were a child. Later, I would see you by day and you left by night. I wanted to enter this living by night. To take back your places of living and dying. The places where you suffered and were shamed. I wanted to know your wholeness in order to love you, wholly, night and day. Yanne of light, Yanne of shadow, Yanne, my most unique.

How can I describe the rage and revolt I felt at your death? A raging anger against everything, including you. Against God, and against your father. The loss of a child can shipwreck a couple; the fruit, the object, the very why of our loving, disintegrates. Guilt devours and threatens to split us. Every glance exchanged calls forth a rush of memories, a shared desperation, how to recover one's soul? How to learn to be again, free of vengeance, without destroying or mutilating one's self? How to learn to love again without you, Yanne, my forever absent?

November 22 to December 21, 1993, 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM, five days a week, the courthouse, fifth floor. I was here every day, usually with your father. I was not here for the coroner's testimony. That was beyond me, they spoke of

Let me see you" "In our (friend)"

a corpse, a body, yours. Your body manhandled, your body humiliated, your body of my body, Yanne, my tortured one. On the day of the verdict, on that day, you understand. I could not have come unless I had come armed. I came here to be with you, but you were not here. Each time I heard your name, a knife turned in my womb, like a labour in reverse, keeping me pregnant with you, forever.

The most effective treatment for heroin addiction is maintenance of methadone, administered in a controlled environment. In Montreal only the Jewish General Hospital and Louis St. Leduc train future physicians in this program.

Evil is always elsewhere. Drugs are always elsewhere. In the shooting galleries of shabby neighbourhoods, in squalid little houses crowding the sidewalks, well-removed from our affluence with its trees and gardens, yet it is here in an elegant park, where it all began for you, child of extremes. Drugs do not respect class differences, the schoolyards and parks of the wealthy kids make rich pickings for pushers. Outremont, like you, beautiful and difficult, a bastion where our children are supposed to be safe, arrogant, intolerant city marching to anti slogans. A city of excellence and accomplishment, in the service of a power that crushes rebels and non-conformists like yourself. Why drugs? To escape perhaps, the ruins of a tired old world where dissidence, risk and commitment have no place. Since your departure, my research and reflection on drugs have helped me to understand you better, and remain with you. I want to share my journey in a film because we need to smash the hypocritical silence surrounding drug addiction. We often spoke of how you wanted to become like me, a committed filmmaker. I entered film the way one enters a convent, because I had faith. I still believe in a kinder world. I believe in human beings. I believe in you. But now sanctuaries of daring and reflection are being starved out of existence. Maybe that is why drugs exist. To escape the gurus of power, profit, and performance.

With heroin between us, my tender, difficult one, being your mother was painful and demanding. But it can be learned. Because of drugs, you fought me. Because of drugs, I fought you back. You had provoked me with your passion for danger. For this unknown thing that had turned you into a stranger. Heroin possessed you. You are not the same when you cast yourself adrift, while night and day I wait for you. And then you return, your hands stroke my cheeks, my hands and your knees open, waiting. Our silence, our tears and our secrets describe the love we thought was lost.

Parents speak proudly of their daughter the physician, of their son the executive, the architect, the writer. I think of you with the same pride. My daughter the junkie, my daughter the hooker. In your name, and in the names of those like you, I appeal to the parents of young people victimised by drugs. Before heroin, before cocaine, we loved these children as easily as the others, and then, we had to learn to love them differently. We, who know them, seen their ravaged bodies, witnessed their delirium, their struggles, their withdrawals and their relapses. Their isolation in the city's wasteland. We, who knew their pain, their distress, together we must speak out on their behalf. Insist on their right to health, to dignity and compassion. On their right to life. Speak out against a war where the

victims are pronounced the criminals. Speak out against a prohibition that solves nothing, that is killing our children, as it enriches the drug lords protected by our laws. We must break the silence, in the names of Guyonme, France, Christian, Francois, Karen, and your name Yanne, my vanished one.

You spoke to me about your friend Pops. He has become my friend. With him I talk to young runaways. I saw bodies, thin as rails, punctured by needles and abscesses. I spent time in shelters and shooting galleries. I saw young, beautiful people - victims of a massacre. I saw them in Montreal hanging out by arcades and vacant lots, in the streets. I saw them in Paris, Geneva, Brussels. I saw them better cared for in Zurich and Amsterdam. And always, when I was with them, I felt the limits of my profession. Not everything is said to be shown. Suffering is obscene, when coldly exposed and taken out of context. Images can become misleading. Lying cliches for voyeuristic eyes. You had been gone for three weeks, when I saw you here, near Hopital Centre in the Bristol Hotel. I hugged you, I didn't understand. I wanted to bring you home, but you were rushing off. Someone was expecting you. Only later did I ask myself, was it your dealer or a john?

The love between mother and daughter, the richest and the most perilous love of my life, rich in complicity and rivalry, marked by tenderness and violence, mutual expectation and disappointment. We wish to be like our mother, and yet we deny her. We see ourselves in our daughter and we are afraid. You were so like me, my free-spirited child. We talked a lot, and never enough. We hugged, we fought bitterly. We loved each other.

I miss you terribly. I want to see you, to hear you, but what I miss most is the feel of you. Your skin, your arms, your back, your lovely slender neck, cradling your head in my lap. Stroking your temples the way you liked. You would close your eyes, soothed and trusting. Life would have meaning. Good night, sweet dreams, sleep tight.

The murderer is there in front of me. Locked inside his cursed memory are the final moments of your life. Your life, that skidded between plenty and want. On the night of the crime you went dancing, and then you had a nap and something to eat a few hours before killing you. And then you went on with this life, deaf to your cries, which still pursue me. Let me go, please, let me go.

The jewelry you were wearing that night was found at his place. It was handled, photographed, numbered, put into bags and presented as mere evidence. Exhibit P-13. Your jewelry became anonymous, as if it had never been yours. Yanne, my plundered one.

Your chains, crucifix, rings and bracelets only took on meaning in the loving hands of Claude and Stephane, who came to identify them. To touch them with love and respect. On the evening of October 17, your father and I had dinner with Claude. We spoke of you, anxious for you to come home. At 3:30 in the morning on October 18, a few hours before your death, Stephane saw you go by the restaurant where he was working. You were walking towards St. Denis street, on your way to meet the one who was to become your assassin.

If only I had known that relapses are part of the healing process. The miracle workers at \$4000 a month don't talk about it. The psychological predisposition, an imbalance of endorphins, they don't talk about it. If only I had known, Yanne, my midnight sun, I could have lightened your burden of shame. I already felt that your acting out had nothing to do with vice or sin. That you were not using drugs for pleasure or sensation, but to dull the edges of your pain. Yanne, my tender warrior. Danger fascinated you. You were drawn to the forbidden, yet it was there to bring you back, to keep you within the norm. But you, like the kite, you wanted to go farther, higher, elsewhere. You wanted to enter the unknown, to pluck out your demons, while stifling a cry, "Let me go."

I think of the last summer you spent with us in the country, to protect yourself from harm. You promised me grandchildren, I asked to be with you at their birth, you promised to be with me at my death. We shall never fulfill these promises, made with so much hope, Yanne. My survival, my lineage extinct, you left my womb to die. It was then that you spoke to me about the legalization of drugs, but like most people, I had never thought about it seriously. You taught me about genuine tolerance, the kind that reaches beyond words and conventions. You said that the prohibition of drugs attempts to standardize people, while tolerance attempts to normalize using, to lift the victims out of crime and horror. You were right. It's absurd to think that intolerance will stop drug abuse, this growing urban epidemic.

Heroin did not kill you, the price of heroin did, controlled by powerful drug lords, protected by powerful lawyers who seldom become users. Sometimes I catch myself dreaming that this lost war is over. Oh Yanne, my tolerant one, what if peace were to break out?

Our children deserve more than silence, shame and contempt, with death as a bonus. They deserve our love and access to the sacred. For you and with you Yanne, my beloved, I will continue my quest. I have no answers, disturbing questions replace my old certitudes. I risk the discomfort of doubt. I choose to trust.

To those who speak to me of you, my daughter, my descendant, I would tell them that you were the iceberg at dawn. I could see the arctic ice flows, immense and luminous, eternal eyes, free and immutable. These images obsessed me. I did not know why. It was your memory that conjured up these images. The iceflow breaks away from the glacier, the iceberg breaks away from the iceflow, and floats down towards a place of transformation. I saw them superb and majestic, radiant in the sun. 12 000 years of ice, melting back into the sea. I grow old before my time, you were my youth. Your death re-shuffles the order of things, I should have gone before you. Your death foreshadows mine. In mourning you, I have learned to live with your death, and I'm learning to live with my own. I accept hearing and listening to your cry, "Let me go, Mama, let me go." I must let you go, stop holding you back. My heart must acquiesce, my body surrender, you must leave my wounded kite and fly towards infinity. I listen, I hear you. I release you, Yanne, my northern light. I let go. I let you go. Mon amour.