

DATELINE: DAYTIME

Widow Emily McLaughlin Tells How She's Able To Go On: **"I Know Jeff's Waiting For Me On The Other Side!"**

• "The morning before Jeff died, he brought me breakfast in bed. On an impulse, he said, 'I want you to have breakfast in bed.' He made bacon and eggs, prepared some orange juice, and put it all on a tray. There were flowers all over the tray. As I lay back, he sat at the end of the bed and said to me, 'Sometimes I feel so happy, I can't believe it. This is too good to be true.' And I said softly, 'I feel that too. It's all too good to be true.' "

It was Emily McLaughlin talking. She sat on the set of *General Hospital*,

looking beautiful in her white nurse's uniform. Her dark brown eyes glowed when she talked of Jeffrey Hunter, who had died suddenly and tragically one morning late in May.

Many women would be bitter at losing a husband whom they had loved very much. But not Emily. She said, "Jeffrey and I knew each other for only five months. But during those months we knew and loved each other as few people ever do. It was the happiest time of my life.

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Emily stands with friends and her son, Bobby, who was given choice if he wanted to attend funeral. He chose to go.



EMILY McLAUGHLIN

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women might say, 'Why did you take him, God?' I'm just saying, "Thank you, God, for letting us have each other for those five wonderful months.

"He trusted everybody," she said, "and once in a while someone cheated him. I remember how angry I was when he made a picture for a European company, and they didn't pay him. Jeff didn't complain. I did. He took everything in stride—even pain. He never complained of physical pain.

"I think he had a premonition that he was going to die. I remember the weekend before his death, he said suddenly, 'Let's go to visit my mother and dad in Milwaukee.' And we did. We weren't supposed to go until the following week, but suddenly he wanted to go sooner.

"Most people don't have in a lifetime what Jeffrey and I had in the short time we were together. Sometimes I've been to a restaurant and I've seen married couples staring past each other, as though they were bored. They'll never know the deep understanding and love Jeff and I had. We laughed and talked and dreamed together; it was like a five month honeymoon. When I had two weeks free and my son Bobby and I joined Jeff in Madrid, it was like a real honeymoon. Bobby and I had never been there, but Jeff, who'd made five or six pictures in Madrid, showed us around everywhere. We were so happy to be seeing Madrid through his eyes.

"Jeff and I found everything in our marriage that we had ever dreamed could be found in marriage."

Many people had been shocked and a little incredulous when Jeff and Emily married each other after knowing one another only about one month. They had met at a cocktail party and had felt instant attraction. On an impulse, Emily had invited him to her home, "if you don't mind having a dinner of leftovers." He'd laughed and said he didn't mind at all.

At Emily's home he met Bobby, her son by her first marriage to Bob Lansing, and

they took to each other instantly. Bobby was with a friend, playing the guitar. Bobby told Jeffrey about his rock 'n' roll group, and showed him a song lyric Emily had written for them. Jeff asked if the boy would mind if he took the lyric home and wrote some music for it. Bobby was delighted.

"That's the way it all started," Emily told me. "It sounds like a 1940 musical, doesn't it? Our whole romance was just that delightful."

Hollywood was skeptical. Getting married in Mexico with her first husband's consent—needed because the ink wasn't dry on her final divorce papers—didn't sound like Emily at all. Her friends knew how upset she'd been when she and Bob Lansing originally decided on a divorce. As for Jeff, he'd been married twice, once to Dusty Bartlett, a model, and also to Barbara Rush, lately of *Peyton Place*, and people said skeptically: "If he couldn't make those two marriages work, why should this work out any better?"

But Emily and Jeff were so much in love. Everything seemed so right. "We were the oldest fourteen-year-olds in Southern California," said Emily, her eyes laughing at the memory. "We were like kids. Our marriage was laughter and music and good talk. We shared everything. I've always enjoyed writing poetry, but had never shared it with anybody else."

It was only during the last few days of their marriage that a shadow crept over it. Emily sensed that Jeff wasn't feeling well. But she didn't dream it was anything serious.

"I don't know whether he suffered any physical pain," she said. "He never complained. I remember once he suffered through third degree burns, but never admitted what he was going through. We'd gone to pick up a turkey the butcher had cooked for us. As Jeff picked it up, the hot grease spilled. Jeff pretended he hadn't been touched by the grease. On the way home, he kept making jokes about the turkey. For three or four days he walked around with third degree burns, and I didn't learn the truth till the day he was to leave for Spain when he fell apart on

the plane." Her voice was sombre.

"I believe that Jeff had some premonition of what was going to happen the day he served me breakfast in bed. When we talked of the house he was going to design for us, the weekend trip we were going to take to Yosemite, the horseback riding we were going to do together, did he know that these things would never come to pass? I don't know. Three or four times—the last time the morning he served me that breakfast—he said to me, 'If I should cross the bridge before you do, darling, there's one thing I want you to know, I'll be waiting for you on the other side.'"

Emily searched my face as though looking for some hint of skepticism. Not finding it, she said, "I believe him. I believe he will be waiting. And that's why I'm telling this story."

She was rehearsing her show at ABC the day Jeff suddenly tumbled down some stairs in their home. On the set she grew suddenly uneasy, sensing something was wrong. She immediately called her home. A friend of Jeff's who had been with him that day, actor Frank Bellows, answered. He said, "Don't worry, Emily. I'm sure it will be all right, but Jeff's fallen."

Emily dashed home as fast as she could. When she got there, she saw how Jeff's eyes had blackened and she knew that there must have been internal bleeding. She called the fire department, and they sent an ambulance. It arrived in five minutes, and Jeff was taken to the hospital. Two neurosurgeons were called in, but it was hopeless. There had been a massive intercranial hemorrhage and a skull fracture.

When the doctors told Emily, "There is no hope," she called her first husband, Bob Lansing, who has always remained her friend. He picked up their son and brought him home; then he joined Emily in her vigil at the hospital. Early the next morn-

ing the expected news came: Jeffrey was dead.

To save her son from the shock of going to the funeral of the man who'd been like a second father to him, Emily encouraged Bob to take the boy with him to San Diego. Not long afterwards, two friends of Bobby's in the neighborhood brought flowers for Jeff and said they wanted to go to his funeral, to honor his memory. It then occurred to Emily that she hadn't been fair to her son in arbitrarily sending him out of town. She called Bob Lansing and said, "I think I'm not crediting our son with being as big a man as he is even though he's only eleven."

"I think you're right," Bob said. He then put Bobby on the phone. "Bobby," Emily said, 'you have a choice. If you want to, you can go to the funeral, but it's all right if you don't want to go. Please call me back in fifteen minutes and let me know what you want to do.' In fifteen minutes Bobby called back and said, "I want to be there."

"Bob brought him back, and Bobby went through everything with me. It couldn't have been easy for an eleven-year-old boy, but he was so brave."

Emily says nothing about how brave she is. She was away from work only a day, but she doesn't call that courage. She explains that she went back to work with people she loves and has worked with for seven years.

She doesn't weep to friends in an agony of self-pity. She doesn't even ask God why he took the man she loved so much and with whom she had so little time. She says, "You can't guess about God's reasons. When you've had something beautiful why not just say, 'Thank you, God?' I do."

—by **Dora Albert**

See Emily McLaughlin on ABC's GENERAL HOSPITAL daily.