

## Fiss It

Don and his younger two kids and I lived in Passaic, N.J. for a while.

Keith was 6 and Tracey was 10 when they first moved up to live with their father.

I hated New Jersey, especially Passaic, but somehow it reminded Don of Roanoke, Virginia where he grew up, so he wanted to be there.

One time Don needed shirts or something, so he went shopping at Syms. He drove up in his Cadillac, which was about the size of the apartment he lived in uptown when I first met him. He got out of the car wearing brand new running shoes. Not that he ever ran, mind you. He just ran those gnarly ancient looking fingers up and down the piano keys, or sometimes a Hammond B-3 organ, if you were lucky. Our doctor said his were the hands of an old soul. But Fred Hopkins said they looked like cadaver hands. Whatever they were, Don could play the most amazing music with those hands. He'd play so delicate and sensitive and deep, you felt like you were in church. His brother James said, "There's something rolling around in there, something rolling 'round in there." And there was. Then he'd start those clusters and swirls with the right hand, and the back of the hand, the knuckles would get all bloody sometimes. And he'd get those rhythms going with his elbow. It was like an incredible storm of nature, but so melodically articulated. It was the most powerful and beautiful music you can imagine. Anyway Don needed shirts or something, so he went into the store, took care of his business and walked back out into the parking lot. And the security guard followed

him out of the store and stopped him, demanding a receipt for those brand new running shoes he was wearing. You see, it didn't matter how many people stood in line carrying stacks of Don's albums and CDs for him to autograph when he played in Japan or wherever it was in the world. At Syms in New Jersey, he was just some black man walking out of the store wearing brand new running shoes, which he just must have stolen.

One time Don and I went to the Secaucus outlet stores to get a few things for ourselves and the kids. I needed shoes so I went into a little shoe store that had a terrific pair of shoes. They were soft black leather lace-ups, like little jazz shoes, except they were made for the street. They were perfect for me. Only thing was, they didn't have my size. I told Don and he got that funny expression on his face and said "I'll fess it." "Fess it" That's what he'd say. That was kind of our code. 'Cause you see, when he wanted, Don could do things. He could kind of fix things. So he walked over to the shoes, noticed a box turned around backwards, pulled it out and turned it around. The box said size 8 & 1/2. I'm size 5 & 1/2. But he opened the box anyway, pulled out the shoes, looked at them and handed them to me, with that funny look still on his face.

And sure enough, those little bad boys were size 5 & 1/2.

'Cause he "fessed it", he "fessed it" for me.

One time Don and I did a little performance tour in Europe. It wasn't like those marathon Jazz tours that he'd do where they'd play one nighters in each city or town,

night after night, city after city, week after week, usually for a month, one time two months straight. Half the time he didn't know where the hell he was. No, this was my tour, so we just played in a few places in Germany. But it was good. We were in the first city and we got hungry, so we went to an outdoor cafe. We were sitting there looking at the menu and all of a sudden Don said, "Yuck, that's disgusting, hamburger ice cream!" And I laughed and laughed, and Don got that serious, almost mad expression on his face because you see, he was very intelligent and he hated it when he missed something. But I couldn't help it. I just laughed and said "Don, do you have any idea what town we're in? "Hamburg-er ice cream."

We did our concert and went on to the next city; I think it was Hannover. And we got hungry again. Oooh, that seemed to happen to us each day. So we walked up to a restaurant. Don was sporting his summer hat, shorts, socks up to his mid calf and brand new running shoes. Uh oh. We walked into the restaurant arm in arm, fine looking couple that we were, or so we thought.

But as soon as we got inside, everybody in the restaurant looked at us together and stopped talking. Could it be...? Or was it those brand new running shoes?

By the spring of 1995 Don was getting sicker and sicker. They admitted him to Memorial Sloan Kettering and he wasn't doing too well. I was mostly staying with him, sleeping when I could on the hospital chair by his bed, until he discreetly had to tell me that I was beginning to smell and better take a break to wash off and change. You see,

people were coming to see him, family, friends, musicians, the record company president...

They were coming so Don could cheer 'em up. Yeah, his spirits were strong that way, but this time his body just wouldn't rally. One day he said to me, "Jana , I don't want you to hold me back." I said, "I won't Don. I want your spirit to be free. It's just that I've worried for so long about the ones I've loved who died, whether they're OK." And he said, "I don't know if I'll have time, but I'll try to give you a sign."

Don didn't want to die in the hospital, so the week before he died, when the doctors couldn't do any more for him, we took him back to his brother Butch and sister-in-law, San's apartment in New Jersey, where he'd be surrounded by lots of family and love and support. And he was. The day before he died, the palliative care team from Sloan Kettering came to see him. He waited with great anticipation for their visit and their assessment of his condition. Oh, the weight of those professional words.

The main doctor examined him briefly and then all she said to him was, "Don, you don't have to worry about eating any more."

He looked at her and swallowed hard, trying to digest all that that inferred. Then he only had one question for them, as he tried to assimilate and make sense of the apparent imminent reality before him. He just really needed to know, and so he asked whether the plastic oxygen tube attached to his nose was going to hold him back from

making his transition. Months later at his memorial at St. Peter's, the doctor marveled at what she had thought was his ever enduring sense of humor.

After the doctors left, things escalated rapidly. Don's body went crazy and by late that night, he couldn't speak anymore. He came around briefly in the morning, just long enough to say to me, "This is hell!" And that was it. San called his children and told them they needed to get over there to see their father right away. Tracey drove up immediately from college and stopped and picked up her little brother, Keith. They came into the bedroom, walked up to the rented hospital bed to hug their father and were overwhelmed by his condition. It's amazing how ill-prepared we almost always all are at such times, no matter what. The kids went into the living room and Tracey tried to do her school work. And we waited. And Don waited, (in "hell"). Finally Little Don and his girlfriend showed up, and he walked up to the bed and hugged his father, and then Don died immediately.

Everybody started crying and Tracey and Keith ran into the room and Tracey started screaming and grabbing onto me shouting, "You'll know what to do, Jana, I know you'll know what to do." But there was nothing I could do.

San and Butch took everyone out of the room so that Little Don's girlfriend, Charlene (who happened to be an oncology nurse), and I could clean Don up, since his bowels had let loose as he died. We turned him over and washed him up really well and put on clean pajamas, turned him back over on his back, and placed his "cadaver hands"

across his chest on an organ naturally. It turns out Fred Hopkins was right, after all. After a little while I went into the living room to see if the kids were all right. And all of a sudden someone, it must have been his brother Butch, went back in the bedroom and let out a shriek, "Look at this!" I went running back in and saw that the most beautiful, peaceful, contented smile had settled onto Don's mouth, his whole face. He had such a wonderful smile. This smile wasn't there before, through the "hell" of dying, but it was there now and that smile stayed throughout the whole trip back home to Roanoke, Virginia and through his funeral and all. And I knew that that was the sign he'd talked about. 'Cause he fessed it. He fessed it for us.