

Jason was a beautiful boy.

If Rob Lowe and Jarod Leto had had a baby, that child wouldn't be as beautiful as Jason. He and his partner Chris were at their weekend house on Fire Island when Jason had what they thought was an appendicitis attack. They hurried off the island to a hospital in Freeport. The next morning, the doctors told Chris that Jason's appendix was intact; but his entire peritonea, the outer membrane that holds all his organs in place, was riddled with rare cancer. He was given a life expectancy of five years. The boys were devastated, without hope, direction, or resources.

That's when I came out to help. I'd been there all along, but I wasn't allowed to express myself. It was too dangerous. But faced with the danger of terminal cancer at 35, embracing the woman you never dreamed you could be was a walk in the park. I'm a performer, and I'd been waiting in the wings for 35 years and now it was 'Places!'

Did I mention that Jason was a beautiful boy? Well honey, Tiffany Jae could rival Liz Taylor in *National Velvet*. Some people cope with grief through therapy, some people cope with pills, Jason used an eye-brow pencil.

The next summer, on that same Isle of Fire, I was crowned Miss Ice Palace 2011. Tiffany Jae was officially liberated; like a marvel super-hero. My super-power was my life force, my drag was my shield, my nemesis was cancer.

We moved back to West Virginia later that year. Jason needed to be near his family and Chris took a leave from work to focus on Jason's care. And I booked myself, sight unseen, as a headliner at Atmosphere Ultra Lounge in downtown Charleston, ready to make my mark on Charleston's unique brand of gay nightlife. We found a beautiful apartment on the river. I know Jason and Chris missed their glamorous life and NYC family. But for me, coming home with Chris, who had recently become our husband, and introducing myself to Jason's family and friends was more thrilling than Times Square.

Growing up queer in coal-mining country was like being a butterfly caught in a swarm of gnats. There was no one like me, and if there was, most likely they were buried deep, unable

to break free. Even in New York, I was too timid to dip in my stiletto; afraid to compete with the fierce urban queens. But it was my time now, and for however long that was, I was going to make myself welcome, in pants or a catsuit. I had a mission, to educate, infiltrate, permeate, and summon every ounce of my super-power to keep Jason alive.

Atmosphere Ultra Lounge was my home. A far cry from the stand-and-model bars of Chelsea. More like a human version of the alien bar in the Star Wars movies. Truckers, married men, hustlers, farmers, drag queens, businessmen passing through town - and me. Once you walked through the heavy velvet curtain, you were a welcome part of the Atmosphere. I performed Friday and Saturday nights with five other regular girls. Two shows each night. Chris was my drag husband, my dresser, my protector, and my bodyguard.

Jason went through numerous treatments and surgeries, too many to count, but as soon as our body was strong enough, we would beat our face with a sock full of powder, put on some padding, a four-inch heel and take our superpower to Atmosphere, where there was no cancer, where there was no fear, and people cheered and threw dollar bills at my feet.

Jason's family came to see me perform often. Even his Dad: Buddy was a quiet man. But when the church committee asked him to step down as deacon because of the attention I was calling, believe me he had plenty to say and we found a new church where all were welcome.

Jason became quite frail near the end, and it became harder for me to meet my responsibilities at the club, and frankly I didn't want to be seen out not looking my best. A girl must keep up appearances. But I stayed with him right until the end. We died last July. Ten years after his diagnosis. Together we doubled the time the doctors gave him. And we had an awful lot of fun.

Tiffany Jae

David Rhodes