



Max

Maksim Tadeusz Szpojnarowicz
5 May 2000 – 17 April 2002

Chris and Sonya are English expatriates who have lived in Singapore for nine years. Max was their first child, a beautiful, happy, healthy little boy who brought them enormous joy. Their lives were turned upside down when Max suddenly died, peacefully, in his sleep just over two weeks before his 2nd birthday. There was no warning—he had only shown “normal” cold symptoms for a few days. Sonya tells of the agonies of their grief and their determination not to lose hope, and shares the eulogy she wrote for Max’s funeral.

Written by Sonya Szpojnarowicz, Max’s mother

I was so happy when I first discovered I was pregnant. I had been keen on starting a family for a while, but had been going through a miserable and unsettled time while my mother in England was very ill and I spent nearly five months taking care of her in a London hospital until she died. Max’s conception a few months later brought me a new joy and optimism and I revelled in my pregnancy, enjoying every new sensation and making a point of nurturing myself and this precious new life.

Our beautiful firstborn son was born on his due date, 5th May 2000, a Millennium baby and a golden dragon—everything seemed so special and so full of promise.

He was a healthy, active little boy, always looking pink and radiant, energetic and nearly always smiling. He was an “easy” baby, a joy to mother, a very special child. He was so good-natured, sweet, kind, patient, cheerful, friendly and happy. He loved his life

in Singapore. He loved his home, his toys and his cat, his friends down the road. He always attracted a lot of attention from the locals in Singapore as he was so blond, with such big blue eyes and a typically cherubic smiley face. He was always friendly, trusting and interested in people. He particularly loved people coming round to our house, whether they were friends he knew or visitors he didn't or even the postman and the dustmen, all of whom he rushed to greet with a delighted "Hello, hello, hello!". When people came in, he would bring them his toys to play with and show them his books, and loved singing his favourite songs to them—especially "Baa Baa Black Sheep" and "The Wheels on the Bus". Singing was one of his favourite things, and our house was always full of singing and dancing and music. We used to make up silly songs or change the words for a joke and we probably had a song for almost every situation.

He was a very good little boy, who never did anything intentionally bad. Probably the naughtiest thing he ever did was drop a few peas on the floor from his highchair with a cheeky grin on his face, looking to see how Mummy would react. Friends would talk to us about disciplining their children, telling of "time outs" and tantrums. We would always shake our heads and almost be embarrassed to say that we never even had to think about any of this with Max, although we would always postscript this by saying that we were sure that the "terrible twos" were just around the corner. But Max never got to turn that corner.

He was delighted with his new baby brother Lukas when he was born in December 2001. We had been breaking him into the idea with a couple of books about new babies and one in particular with photos of a baby growing from newborn to toddler was a special favourite. He used to help rock Lukas's chair and bring him toys to play with, shaking rattles in front of him to make him laugh. He loved it when he and Lukas bathed together and when they had milk together.

His language skills were increasing rapidly. He loved counting the stairs with us. He was just beginning to string words together to try out sentences—"Sit down baby", "No bite a Mak" (said to mosquitoes). Rather poignantly, his last new words and phrases were "new day", "bad cold" and "heartbeat".

In April 2002 he came down with a cold—nothing particularly bad or unusual but one of those toddler colds which made him a bit quiet and miserable with a runny nose and reduced appetite. But he had had things like this before and always fought them off, so we weren't worried. He had cold symptoms for five days, but during this period, he still had a good time. My husband Chris had been away for a week, coming back on Friday evening and we had an especially good weekend. On Saturday we bought Max his first potty (which he kept sitting on proudly with his clothes on in the shops), went to his beloved Bird Park and then later to Raffles Marina for a party. We stayed late into the evening, Max revelling in the attention from everybody there, rushing off to see the moon and stars and tell everyone where his boat was. He had a particularly exciting evening as when we eventually got back to the car it failed to start and we ended up going home in a taxi which he found very funny. The next day our friends held a children's

party to celebrate the Cambodian New Year and Max loved playing with all the children in the garden, especially as the little boy there had just got a new trampoline. We had a close, happy few days as a family.

Then on Max's last day, Tuesday 16th April, he went to his gym club in the morning with Chris and jumped excitedly on his beloved trampolines. In the afternoon, he felt a bit sorry for himself and sat on the sofa watching his favourite Teletubbies with Lukas in his baby chair beside him, while we moved furniture around. He didn't really want any dinner and had some diarrhoea, but then he perked up at bathtime and played and splashed with Chris, and drank all his milk at bedtime. We all kissed goodnight.

I went in to check him as usual at midnight, and he had a bit of a fever. We debated waking him to give him some paracetamol to bring it down but decided he needed sleep more than anything and left him in peace. We put the baby monitor on as usual, and turned up the volume to full in case he woke up in the night with his fever.

Then in the morning, when we woke, he was still quiet. We were pleased, thinking he was having a much needed lie-in. We made plans for the day and I said I'd take the boys to the Zoo rather than go to Max's usual playgroup at St. George's as he was probably infectious. Then when I eventually went into his room to wake him, the world caved in around me. He was dead in his cot, lying cold and stiff and face down. There are no words to describe the feelings whirling around my head all at once. It was so obvious that he was dead—but how could that possibly be???? His body was there but the spirit and essence that was Max had gone. I will never forget those painful images.

An autopsy was done, which concluded that Max's death was "consistent with viral pneumonitis". Nothing is proved conclusively as they didn't manage to culture any viruses but it seems that Max's lungs were attacked by the virus and so compromised his breathing—although there were no visible symptoms of this other than the seemingly normal cold symptoms. So many other children in Singapore had what seemed to be the same virus at the same time but for some completely unexplainable reason, Max was unlucky. His lungs succumbed even though he was in every other way, a completely healthy, fit, strong boy, at the top of the scales for weight and height.

I don't really know how I got through those terrible days, weeks and months. A large part of me wanted to die with Max. I couldn't bear to face reality—the reality which I had always thought I'd known had been thrown into disarray and chaos. The pain of the loss, shock, grief, rage, horror, disbelief was heartbreaking, soul-wrenching, spirit-breaking. I remember that it was unseasonably and dramatically stormy for a while—dark skies, howling winds, pouring rain, thunderclaps—this felt so right—the world was turned on its head and was howling with grief alongside me.

We were lucky in that we had our second son, Lukas, who was four months old. He was quite literally our lifesaver. He took away any choice—he was our beautiful and deserving son and he needed us—and we loved him. I was breastfeeding him so I made myself eat, drink and rest so that I could keep going. But it was very, very hard.

We decided to make many things in our life different to help us get through the days—Chris was due to start a new job at a new company anyway, and we moved to a completely different house in a completely different area.

Nearly three years have passed since that terrible day. And we are still here. I will always wish passionately that things weren't the way they are, always feel a desperate yearning for my first son—as if there was a big “P.S.” after everything we ever did or said—“BUT MAX IS DEAD”. But life just keeps on moving on. Lukas is now older than Max ever got to be and our family has grown with our third and fourth sons, Jakob and Kaspar. We still miss Max every day, think about him, talk about him (Lukas loves to see pictures of Max and to talk about things he used to do)—but we are also able to be happy.

A funeral was held for Max at St. George's Church, Minden Road, where I used to take him to weekly playgroup for all his life apart from his time in Holland. It is a very welcoming, family church, always full of children. The children from the playgroups all painted butterflies to decorate the church and wrote messages on them. This is the eulogy I wrote for Max which was read at the funeral by our dear friend Andrew:

Max Means “The Greatest”

From the moment of his conception his life was bursting with great joy and great promise. Before he was born he crossed the Equator on a sailing boat to celebrate the new Millenium; he holidayed in Australia, Thailand and Hong Kong and he lived for a while in a beautiful flat in London next to Greenwich Park. Even his date of birth was special—the 5th of the 5th 2000, a day when five planets were momentarily in line. He was born in Singapore and lived there for three quarters of his too short life, and for six months, he lived with us in Amsterdam looking out over the beautiful Herengracht canal.

He saw snow—real in Holland, foam in Singapore. He laughed at the world from his favourite seat on the front of our bicycle and cycled through tulip fields and by the sea in a glorious Dutch spring and then later in East Coast Park, Sentosa and other local haunts. Every Saturday, his proud Daddy would take him cycling—no matter where, as they both just loved being together on the bicycle. He holidayed on Tioman and Sibul islands, in Spain, Cambodia, the Cameron Highlands, Langkawi, Vietnam, Desaru, England,

Holland...Perhaps his favourite was playing in Angkor Watt with two little Cambodian girls and climbing delightedly over the ruins and tree roots which were to him an enormous playground.

He was only just beginning. He took great delight in his rapidly expanding vocabulary and repertoire of songs, and was just entering the world of letters and numbers and colours. Nearly every day he had a new word and loved using it again and again and again. He was always singing. He greeted everybody and everything he met with a heart-melting smile. You couldn't help but be won over. He'd just got his first potty.

He had a very short life, but nearly every moment of his just over 700 days was filled with happiness, joy, love and laughter.

He loved his home, his car seat, his toys, his bedroom, his books and his pictures. And shopping trolleys, lifts, escalators, buses, trains and the beeps on the BBC World Service. He adored his friends, his cat; music, dancing and songs, his playgroup at St. George's, and the trampolines at Prime Gym. He loved visiting playgrounds, the Zoo, the Bird Park, the pool and his boat. And most recently of course, he loved his new baby brother, Lukas.

He loved us.

And he always knew how much we loved him.

Hardly a day went by when we didn't say to each other how beautiful he was, how much we loved him, how we wondered if all parents could feel the way we did. He enriched our lives beyond measure—everything we did with him was fun, special, even going to the supermarket became a fun-filled adventure.

Now everything we see makes us think of him and we feel such acute pain and intense agony that he is not here with us any more.

We want him back.

We will always want him back.

We are broken.

Crushed—not knowing how we will be able to pick up the pieces and start again.

Max has a beautiful baby brother, Lukas, who worshipped him and watched his every step with love and smiles.

We know we will rebuild our lives because of Lukas.

Lukas means “light”—and he will have to help light our way through this awful darkness.

But he will never again have his big brother Max to play with.

Max means “the greatest”. He gave us the greatest joy. When we thought of him we couldn't help but feel the greatest love, pride and happiness.

Now we feel the greatest pain, loss, anger, confusion, desolation and desperation.

But we hope that with the light that is Max's baby brother Lukas, we will one day be able to think again of our darling Max with the greatest happiness that he so much deserves.

Untitled

As I look up to the sky
I really wonder why
We had to let you go.

But I know where you are
When I look out for
And see your shining star.

There you are, and there you'll stay
Shining in the milky way
Far, far out of reach.

If I could have had a few last words
Speech would have left me like a flight of birds.
I wouldn't have known what to say.

You'll always have a place, a part
Deep inside my troubled heart
Where you'll never leave.

– Jessie Opio, Sonya's god-daughter (aged 12 years)