



Michael Mathes/Francesco Guidicini

Nemcova the model and, left, memorials to tsunami victims on a Thai beach

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She is unabashed about using her celebrity status to promote the plight of children across Asia: "In Pakistan, after the earthquake, somebody wrote in a newspaper that it was forgotten because there was no supermodel involved. And unfortunately that is so true. Angelina Jolie went there in November and I went out in April."

Her ambition now is to do for the fashion industry what she rather naively feels Jolie has done for Hollywood: to give it a social conscience. She encourages the companies she works with to donate to charity. Judging by the way she charms staff at the Cafe Royal into putting her charity billboards on prominent display, she is more than a match for corporate fashion. The next project is a charity coffee-table book, an American speaking tour is planned and a television show is in the pipeline.

One drawback is the interest in her love life. Nemcova was recently photographed playing in the surf in Ibiza with Blunt. They reportedly met at an HHF dinner in New York in December and although they have tried to play down their relationship, she doesn't contradict me when I suggest that it must have been hard to move on.

"I know there is a risk of putting [Simon] on a very high pedestal," she says, "but one great thing is I know he will always be a huge part of my life and I am lucky to have that. He would want me and his family to be happy and to live our lives 100%."

Does she find separation hard now, for instance when Blunt goes on tour? "Yes, I guess... with any of my friends and family. Not panicky so much but I miss them and I'm more aware that something can happen so I try and catch all the opportunities to be with them and enjoy the moment."

Her conversation is full of hearts, flowers, "love and light"; this luvvie take on some subjects occasionally jars but is obviously heartfelt. It is as if optimism has become her armour against the tragedy which is never far away.

There are times when, remembering Atlee, her face crumples into what look like imminent tears, but it is always forced out as a laugh. Her resolution to live for the present is clearly working but you sense that any negativity is hard to bear. When I mention Blunt's lambasting in the British press for churning out mawkish songs, there is a long pause.

"It's hard, it's very hard," she falters. "There are those who wish you well... and those who cannot so they are bitter. In life you get back what you give out."

Then the winning smile returns: "Life is too short to be miserable, too damn short."

www.give2asia.org/happyheartsfund

Fashionable face of tragedy

As the celebrities, agents, and designers cascade into Petra Nemcova's party, she kisses them three times each. This is the hottest ticket at London Fashion Week and the supermodel, with her hazel eyes and dazzling smile, is a natural scene-stealer. Even so, it is hard not to notice the four girls standing to one side: young, gauche, with legs like toothpicks.

The fashion industry closed ranks last week on the issue of size zero models, but Nemcova is brimming with indignation. When I ask whether London should follow Madrid's example and ban models with a body mass index lower than 18, she says: "I think it's really important to take action on this. It has been going on for too long. Young girls and boys have been starving themselves and it's not healthy." She is horrified at the recent death of a model called Luisel, who had been fasting for a show in Uruguay and collapsed as she stepped off the catwalk: "[Fashion] is not worth it."

Nemcova, 27, understands the pressure to be skinny only too well. As a young Czech model she tried endless diets: nothing but a plate of rice with sea salt in the evening; two kilos of apples a day; nibbling only on the odd cracker if she got hungry — she even became addicted to laxatives.

Now those days are far behind. Since the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that killed her boyfriend Simon Atlee, the British photographer, and almost crippled her, Nemcova has seen the world of fashion anew. She is not in London to tread the catwalk or to promote the autumn campaign that she has just shot for John Lewis, the depart-

As other models at London Fashion Week worried if they were too thin, Petra Nemcova had bigger issues to discuss. She tells **Vanessa Jolly** about the tsunami that killed her lover and changed her life

ment store. The party she is hosting is to raise awareness for the Give2Asia charity's Happy Hearts Fund (HHF) — set up after Atlee's death, to help children affected by the tsunami.

She has a new boyfriend, the singer James Blunt, and is keen to emphasise that she is not "stuck in the past". But it is a cruel irony that of the myriad photographs that have been taken during her modelling career, the best known is the one of her lying bruised on a Thai hospital bed in the days after the tsunami.

She and Atlee had just had breakfast and were packing to leave the exclusive Khao Lak Orchid Resort, on the mainland north of Phuket, when they heard children screaming. In an instant, water was bursting through the windows and doors of their beach bungalow. Simon, a strong swimmer, was powerless against the force of the current, unable to grab hold of the hut roofs and treetops that were suddenly at eye level. "I

was shouting, 'Catch the roof, catch the roof'. I don't know if he did or not..." she trails off. "That was the last time I saw him."

Nemcova was amazed at how calm she felt and believes this helped her to survive. "I caught the roof but it was a blessing and a curse. There was debris everywhere and the pressure of the water and the trash was breaking my pelvis. I was trying to get up and I couldn't, I was drinking all this black water and I thought, okay, if I have to die I have to die." It was a peaceful moment: "I stopped fighting and became completely calm, blissful even, and at that moment I suddenly saw blue sky."

She was able to clutch a palm tree and for eight hours she lay naked on top of it alert for noises: the cracking sound of a falling tree, the crash of another wave.

Sixty-nine days later, when she was recuperating at home in the Czech Republic, news came that Atlee's body had been found. She was devastated. As soon as she could walk again, she knew she had to go back to Thailand.

Only the frame of the Orchid hotel was left; the surrounding area looked like "a jungle". Staring out to sea she vowed to make sense of Atlee's life, and hers. "I learnt a lot," she says in her soft accent. "Before the tsunami I had been running so fast, I was a workaholic. Now I really try to do more meaningful things in life and I live for the present because the next second something can happen and everything can be gone."

When she breezes into the Cafe Royal before the party which she is hosting for Next Model Management, she seems carefree. In a simple black vest and jeans, the only

professional giveaway is her meticulously shaped eyebrows.

The tragedy, she says, has reversed her priorities: "When I got home I couldn't buy anything. My friend would try to take me out shopping. She would say, 'Come on, let's buy this handbag, we'll do it together, the same one'. I was like no, no, no, it felt so bad — the money could have been used so differently."

Nemcova has always had trouble coming to terms with the glamorous world she now inhabits. Growing up in Karvina, a former mining town four hours from Prague, her father, a bricklayer, and mother, a

teacher, provided for Petra and her sister Olga as best they could.

"I had the same pair of winter school shoes for five years, but I am thankful for the way I grew up, with a lot of love and the basic values of appreciation and respect." When the communist regime fell, she was 10 years old and can still remember the excitement of seeing fashion TV for the first time. She became an avid shopper — and since the moment she was spotted in a national talent search aged 16, she has been enchanted by fashion.

However, it is hardly surprising that the tsunami and the poverty it caused have played on her con-

science. As soon as she was physically able, the model (previously best known for being cover girl on the 2003 Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue) set up HHF in partnership with the more established Give2Asia. In the year it has been running, HHF has raised well over \$1m. One of the first communities to receive funds were the Moken sea gypsies of Chao Thai Mai. A grant has enabled the local school, riddled with termites after the tsunami, to be rebuilt and extended to cater for older children. The tsunami had so affected the fishing and tourist trade that 20% of the children were malnourished.