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The Dead Wife's Handbook

Written by Hannah Beckerman

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The Dead Wife's Handbook

HANNAH BECKERMAN



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For my mum, Tania,
My husband, Adam,
And my daughter, Aurelia:
Three generations who taught me
what love really means

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

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The Dead Wife's Handbook

Prologue

I didn't mean to die so young. I don't suppose anyone does. I don't suppose many people would willingly fail to reach their thirty-seventh birthday or their eighth wedding anniversary or see out their daughter's seventh year on the planet. I suspect there aren't many people who would voluntarily relinquish all that, given the choice.

But that's the point; we don't get a choice, do we? One day you're leaving a restaurant with your husband, conscious of the future only so far as your certainty that it will arrive and you will be part of it, preoccupied with the promotion you've just been celebrating and the summer holiday you've been planning and the child's progress you've been discussing. An evening when your happiness is due only in part to the bottle of champagne you ordered but mostly a symptom of those rare occasions when the pieces of the jigsaw slot into place and you see with clarity the picture of the life you've been trying to create for the past weeks, months, years. And the next moment you're slumped on the floor, with only the briefest awareness of how you got there and yet the sharpest recognition of the hot, tight pain invading your left arm and marching on towards your chest.

I remember thinking that no one survives pain like this.

After my heart had decided it was no longer for this world – long before the paramedics arrived, long before that night even began it turns out: a heart that had been secretly destined to expire prematurely for as long as it had been beating – I found myself here.

I don't actually know where here is. If I believed in heaven then I'd have been disappointed if this was it. There's no one else around, no reunions with loved ones, no winged beings checking people in or out. I'm completely alone. And lonely. More lonely than I ever knew possible. There are no gardens, no rainbows, no magical worlds like those at the top of the Faraway Tree. Just whiteness spreading out into the infinite beyond, as far as the eye can see, in every conceivable direction.

The only respite in this interminable void is when occasionally, sporadically, the whiteness beneath me clears, like fog receding begrudgingly on the coldest of winter mornings, and I'm granted a dress-circle view of the living world to watch my family getting on with life without me.

Who grants it, or why, or how, I've no idea.

It's both a blessing and curse, being able to see and hear the people I've left behind, the people I love, but in silence, invisible, impotent. I'm lucky, I know, to be able to observe fragments of their lives, to listen to their conversations, to pretend – even if only fleetingly – that I'm a part of their lives still. But it's painful, too, the inability to console them when they're sad, to laugh with them when they're happy or, simply, to hold and be held by them, to give and take refuge in the comfort of physical intimacy.

Perhaps it wouldn't be quite as bewildering if it weren't so unreliable, this unfathomable access I have to the living; sometimes my time with them can last a whole day, at others just a matter of minutes. Sometimes I'm kept waiting only a few hours between visits, at others long, solitary weeks go by without so much as a glimpse of the real world. I spend inordinate stretches of time alone in the impenetrable whiteness wondering what I might have missed in my enforced absence although, in truth, I have

very little conception of the passage of days here.

And it's frustratingly unpredictable too; sometimes I'm allowed to observe that which I most want to be a part of, while at others the air clears suddenly and I've no choice but to witness that which I'd most like to miss. It can be cruel like that.

I wonder, occasionally, when I let my fears and fantasies get the better of me, whether my presence here is a privilege or a punishment. Whether it's a temporary existence or is set to continue for all eternity. Whether there's a future in which I'll be something other than a passive observer of a life I no longer lead.

Sometimes I wonder whether any of what I'm seeing is actually real. In moments of desperation, I find myself questioning whether I am, in fact, dead at all. I begin to hope that I'm in an ephemeral coma and that the whiteness and the loneliness and the lives of the living I'm observing are nothing more than products of my unconscious fantasies.

I have a lot of time to think about these things.

I wonder, too, whether it's more distressing to watch your family in mourning for you or whether it will be worse when, one day, they stop grieving and start living painlessly without me. I try to imagine how I'll feel when I begin to occupy that place which all dead people must dread: that distant, rarely visited corner of someone's mind, neatly packed away in a box marked 'memories'.

I often find myself thinking back to those conversations couples have about death, the conversations where each proclaims that should they die first they'd want their bereaved to carry on with life, meet someone new, be happy. I know now how delusional those conversations are. How untruthful. I know now that the only thing in the world

worse than dying is the fear that one day you'll be replaced and that life will continue with only the faintest echo of your existence.

Because to our loved ones, at least, we're all irreplaceable, aren't we?

Shock

Chapter 1

Today is my anniversary. Not my wedding anniversary or my engagement anniversary or the anniversary of the day Max and I first met at a friend's wedding and knew immediately that this could be something special in a way that I'd always imagined only ever happened in movies.

Today is my Death Anniversary. A year ago today I was still alive, with fifteen hours remaining before the arrhythmia I'd been oblivious to for the past thirty-six years would fatally disturb the supply of blood to my left ventricle, which in turn would cease pumping blood to my brain which would, in a matter of minutes, kill me.

Anniversary probably isn't the right word, is it?

I've wondered a lot over the past few days, ever since I heard Max and his parents discuss it, what Max and Ellie and my mum and all the other people whose lives I used to be a part of will do today. I've wondered whether it's maudlin and self-indulgent and even selfish of me to hope that they'll commemorate it somehow. But I also know that I'll be devastated if they don't.

I'm often full of trepidation when the whiteness dissolves and I wonder what, on this occasion, I might discover on my return. Especially after lengthy absences dominated by fear and speculation about what I may have missed in my time apart. Not that time has any clear, linear definition for me now, not in the sense that I knew it back then. Instead of time, there's space and silence and often, despite the loneliness, an inexplicable tranquillity. But that doesn't stop me

worrying about how they are, about what they're up to, about how they've been coping during my absence. I think worrying's just a mother's prerogative isn't it, dead or alive?

Today appears to be starting much like any other. The clouds have cleared to reveal the illuminated digits of a bedside alarm clock – the very same clock that woke me, every single morning, for the last seven years of my life – telling me it's a little after six-thirty. Ellie is scrambling under the duvet where Max is only just beginning to stir towards consciousness. She burrows under his heavy, sleeping arm and absent-mindedly twists the sparse hairs on his chest around her fingers. He takes hold of her hand, only in part to stop the tickling, but mostly to reassure her he knows she's there.

I think this is the time of day I miss them most. I miss the sensation of Ellie clambering on to our bed and the gentle weight of her lithe body awakening me each morning. I miss her obliviousness to the adult limbs she crawled over in her bid to locate the smallest of gaps between us where she'd slip, feet first, under the duvet. I miss the smell of her hair and watching her dozing eyelids flutter and the warmth of her limbs – exuding heat after a long night under her Hello Kitty bed linen – intertwined with mine.

Max and I each used to wrap our arms around her, holding her tight between us. An Ellie Sandwich we'd call her, and it would make her giggle. We'd tell her she was the best breakfast anyone could wish for.

'Daddy?'

Max emits a deep groan and pulls Ellie into a secure embrace by way of a response.

'Daddy, are you awake?'

Ellie struggles to free herself from Max's arms and gently pokes at his eyelids.

'No. I'm still asleep.'

Ellie giggles. It's a game I think they play almost every morning and yet one she never seems to tire of.

'You are awake, Daddy. You talked.'

'I'm sleep-talking, munchkin. I'm definitely not awake. See.'

Max produces a loud, exaggerated snore. Ellie is still laughing.

'Daddy, be awake. It's morning.'

'Only just. Stop poking me in the eye and I'll almost certainly wake up faster. How did you sleep, sweetheart?'

'I slept all night. I didn't even have to go to the toilet.'

'That's very good, angel. And did you have any nice dreams?'

Max asks about Ellie's dreams every morning. It's his way of continuing a tradition, our tradition, a tradition which began just weeks into our romance, in which I'd share with him the intricately recovered details of stories I'd told myself during the night. He said he'd never known anyone remember their dreams with such vividness, that he couldn't believe someone could be so affected during the day by events that existed only in the unconscious depths of night. Occasionally I'd dream that he'd been unfaithful to me and in the morning I'd feel as unnerved as if he really had betrayed me.

You can't blame me for infidelities I commit during your dreams, he'd say, laughing, comforting, reassuring me that even my most potent fears didn't have the power to make something real.

Now I don't dream at all. I don't sleep so I can't dream. Dreaming is just one of the many experiences that I miss about being alive. I miss the magic of it, the knowledge that I'm still thinking, fearing, desiring and despairing long after I'm conscious of it. I miss the chance to escape.

'Can't remember. What did you dream about, Daddy?'

'Well, sweetheart, I had a dream about Mummy. You were in it too. We were in a little boat on the sea, like that one we had in Greece, and it was really hot and sunny. Do you remember that boat we hired for the day, when we sailed around all those pretty bays?'

'Was that when I wanted an ice cream but you said you couldn't get me one?'

Max laughs. She's right. She spent the whole day on a boat desperate for ice cream, unable to understand why we couldn't magic her one out of thin air. It was a blissful holiday. Two idyllic weeks in Greece – first Athens and then Naxos – with Max as our personal tour guide. I'd worried when we'd booked it that Ellie would get bored, scrambling over ancient ruins and visiting historical landmarks, but she seemed to have inherited Max's passion for history and was spellbound by his tales of gods and goddesses, of war and revenge, of love and honour.

It had been the first holiday when Ellie, still only five at the time, had nonetheless been a proper travelling companion, staying up late with us to banquet on plump olives and pan-fried halloumi, fresh grilled sardines and oversized prawns, reminiscing about the day's events, discussing tomorrow's possible adventures and developing her own, individual hierarchy of aesthetic pleasures: her preference for clear blue waters over dusty olive groves, for hills over flatlands, for sunsets over midday blue skies.

It was our last holiday together as a family. I wonder if she'll have any memories of it at all in years to come.

'Trust you to remember the one time I failed to find you an ice cream. I'm a pretty good ice-cream hunter usually, aren't I?'

Ellie giggles and flings her arm across Max's chest. I close my eyes and imagine it's me she's clinging to, the warmth of

her breath on my neck a memory still recent enough and so powerful that for the briefest of moments I believe I can actually feel her: the flesh of her cheek resting against mine, the air from deep within her breezing softly over my skin, the weight of her body in my arms, the plumpness of her cheek on my shoulder, the softness of her hair against my lips.

I ache, physically, to hold her.

I open my eyes to find Max gently prising Ellie from his body. He holds her face in his hands and studies her with a seriousness at odds with the conversation they've just been having.

'Sweetheart, do you know what day it is today?'

I feel the tectonic plates of panic shift. For the past few days I've thought of nothing other than the hope that he'd remind her, but now that he is I find myself wishing he wouldn't. I know it's not fair on her to keep invoking the memories, but equally – selfishly – I know I couldn't bear it if he allowed her to forget.

'Er, it's Wednesday, Daddy. I went to school yesterday and the day before and before that it was the weekend.'

'Yes, sweetheart, you're right. But today's also a special day. Shall I tell you why?'

Ellie's face betrays a combination of confusion, suspicion and hope. She hasn't remembered. Of course she hasn't. She's only just seven, after all. It's a relief, to be honest, to know that she hasn't been counting down the days towards the anniversary of the night she was told her mummy's never coming home again.

'What's special today? Are we having a party?'

'No, munchkin, we're not having a party. Do you remember this time last year when we were all really sad because Mummy got ill and wasn't going to be with us any more?

Well, today it's exactly a year since Mummy died. So I thought it would be nice if, after school, you and I visit the place where she's buried. We could maybe take her some flowers to let her know that we're thinking about her. Do you think you might like to do that?'

I'd love you to do that.

Ellie doesn't seem so sure. She buries her head in Max's chest, her eyes scrunched closed, as if wanting to shut herself off from the whole world and from this conversation in particular.

Max strokes the top of her head.

'What's wrong, sweetheart? Does it make you sad to talk about Mummy? You know that's okay, don't you? I feel really sad when we talk about Mummy. We miss her, don't we?'

Ellie's response is the tensing of her body into an even tighter ball, her eyes still firmly closed.

Perhaps that's my answer. Perhaps it's all too much for Ellie. Perhaps both Max and I are forgetting just how young she is, how vulnerable, how fragile still.

'Angel, I'm sorry. I know it's hard. Really I do. I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to. I just thought it might be nice for us to remember Mummy in that way today. Is it talking about Mummy that's making you upset?'

There's an almost imperceptible shaking of Ellie's long, brown curls. It's at moments like this that I most question what I'm doing here. Why let me witness what's going on in the world without enabling me to scoop up my baby girl and make it all better for her?

'Do you think you might be able to talk to me, sweetheart? I think we're both really sad today, but maybe it'll be a bit better if we tell each other how we're feeling. Do you think you can do that?'

Ellie's unresponsive. I don't know what to do. I know there's nothing I can do. But then I'm not sure I'd know what to do if I was Max either. I'm not sure there's anyone who can teach you how to make the world right for one who's already experienced so much go wrong.

'Is it that you don't want to go to the cemetery? Is that it?'

Ellie exhales a heavily burdened breath and tentatively nods her head.

It pains me even though I know it shouldn't. Rationally I know that no seven-year-old would relish the prospect of visiting a cemetery. Maternally I know that she's too fragile to suffer repeated grief. And yet I still fear the possibility of getting lost in the labyrinth of Ellie's memory, of becoming nothing more than a word spoken without remembrance or thought or feeling attached. But I'm not sure what more Max could possibly do to try and keep alive in her mind the mother who loved her so very much and who never wanted to leave her.

'Sweetheart, can you look at me?'

Max tries to pull Ellie's head from where it's still burrowed against his body, but it's as if she's stuck to him with glue, such is her determination to shield herself from the grief she's so far from being ready to face.

'Okay, you stay there. But do you think you can tell me what it is you don't like about the cemetery? Because I think that if you can tell me it might not feel so bad.'

There's a long pause while Ellie considers Max's proposition.

'It's scary.'

The words, mumbled into Max's chest, are only just audible, as though to say them clearly, out loud, may bring upon the speaker some bad fortune even worse than the one she's already endured.

I'd thought that there was no greater guilt beyond that of dying and leaving your daughter motherless. I thought I'd accepted that I had no control over my death, that it wasn't in my power not to leave Ellie, that sometimes there's simply no correlation between the things we feel guilty about and our complicity in their cause. I'd thought perhaps the guilt might begin to erode with time.

But guilt, it would seem, is the titanium of emotions.

'Angel, I think everyone finds cemeteries a bit scary. Why don't you tell me what scares you most and maybe we can make your fears go away?'

Max manages to prise Ellie's head from his chest where she's finally ready to open her eyes and face the world that's betrayed her.

'It's all those dead bodies. They're horrible. How do you know they're not going to come out of the ground like in *Scooby Doo*?'

Ellie's more assertive now, confident that the cartoon world must surely mirror her own.

'In *Scooby Doo*, it's never really a monster or a zombie that goes around scaring people, is it? It's always just a person dressed up like that, like at Halloween. You know there's no such thing as people coming back from the dead, don't you?'

I can't help but wonder if it wouldn't be preferable to Ellie if the dead were to come back to haunt the living. At least in that case death wouldn't be final. At least then she might not have lost me forever.

'But it's so quiet there. It really gives me the creeps.'

Ellie's looking at Max imploringly now. Maybe they should just wait until next year, or the year after that, or whatever time in the unforeseeable future she's ready to face the inanimate commemoration of me. It's not as though my headstone's going anywhere, after all.

'I know cemeteries can be a bit spooky, sweetheart, but I'd be there with you. How about this: how about we just pop along after school and if you really don't like it after five minutes, we'll leave. How does that sound?'

That sounds like the perfect solution, Max.

'Mmm . . . okay, Daddy. If you find it scary too then I don't want you to have to go all by yourself. But you promise that if we get creeped out we can leave?'

'I promise, angel. Hand on heart.'

And hope not to die.

As Max and Ellie settle into the final few minutes of their morning embrace, Max pulls Ellie into his arms and kisses her, protectively, on the top of her head.

I always knew Max would be a great father. I just hadn't been prepared for the extent to which my own love for him would multiply when I witnessed quite how great. I'd thought, during those first few years together when it was just the two of us, that it wasn't possible to love him any more than I already did. I thought I knew the unrivalled depths of his patience, his generosity, his compassion, of his uncanny ability to make every situation – however difficult – seem manageable. But then along came Ellie and with her the proof that even those you think you know best still have the capacity to surprise you, as I witnessed the tenderness and awe with which he greeted our little girl into the world.

And now, here he is, parenting our child without me. I'd never really considered that possibility when I was alive. I don't suppose anyone does. I don't suppose many people can bear to acknowledge the chance, however remote, that we may not be around to guide our children into adulthood.

I hear the seven o'clock beeps of Max's alarm clock and the whiteness begins to gather beneath me, and I know, for this

morning at least, that my access is coming to an end. As Max and Ellie fade out of view, I'm left with the image of them huddled under a duvet together, sharing the cosiest of morning rituals, a sight that would fill any mother's heart – even my defunct one – with love and with longing.