MRS DEATH MISSES DEATH

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1

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Mourn the dead and fight like hell for the living

Disclaimer:

This book contains dead people.

This book cannot see the future. This book is dabbling in the past. This book is not about funerals although funerals are mentioned. You do not have to wear black to read this work. You do not have to bring flowers.

Caution: This work contains traces of eulogy.

Warning: This work contains violent deaths.

Spoiler alert: We will all die in the end.

This book cannot change the ending or your ending or its own ending. This book does not know how to switch on the light at the end of the tunnel. This book cannot contact the other side. This book cannot speak to the dead or for

the dead. This book will not confirm if there is an afterlife or an alternative universe. This book will not improve your karma. This book will not nag you to live a healthier life. This book will not help you quit smoking. This book is not going to urge you to age gracefully. This book does not advocate the use of that funereal phrase 'he had a good innings'. This book does not contain any person or persons clapping their hands and singing *kum-by-yah-mi-lord*. This book may be used for mild to moderate relief from grief, fear and pain, however if symptoms persist please buy a ticket to see a live reading of this work where you will *find the others.*

Caution: Do not exceed death.

This work has a very high dead and death count. Take with caution. Take your time. Do your lifetime in your own life time. If you are sensitive or allergic to talk of the dead or non-living things use this work in small doses. This is not a self-help brochure. This is not a guide to avoiding dying. If you think you are about to drop dead, please seek medical advice immediately.

This work has very little to do with God, the Gods, Goddesses, Satan or the Devil. This work is not focused on a battle of good and evil or right and wrong. This is not about morality or heaven and hell or sinners and saints. This book does not judge you or your choices. This book

is not connected to or promoting any religion or cult. This is not a map to the way out of here. This is not a compass. This book does not contain directions to heaven or hell – see also Elysium, Valhalla, Gan Eden, The Fields of Aaru, Vaikuntha, Tír na nÓg, Cockaigne, Big Rock Candy Mountain or any other world versions of otherworld.

This work calls the righteous spirits of all of our mighty ancestors now and in the hour of our need. We take a breath and look back in amazement and wonder at how our ancestors survived so we may also survive. We take another deep breath, we feel our hearts beating inside our bodies, and we celebrate that the same empowerment and spirit runs in our blood now and can be found in our DNA today. We give thanks to our ancestors, thanks for giving us life, for being alive to feel alive and to share this one magnificent connection to life and all living things.

This book does not mention every person that has ever died – if you wished this book to have mentioned another death, we can only apologise now in advance, for not knowing which death or dead celebrity you wanted mentioned and celebrated in this book at time of writing and printing. At the time of writing this book mourns for Prince, David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, Toni Morrison and Aretha Franklin. And this book sincerely hopes there aren't any more inspirational human beings, bold souls, brave hearts and superheroes to add to that dead list before we go to print. Amen.

This book contains traces of ghosts. This book may contain bones and other human remains. This book has been haunting me. This book may haunt you. This book is about you and me and all of us. We will use the term 'human' or 'human being' to mean people who identify as human, that is being 'alive' and 'living', and furthermore discuss how they are now 'dead' and use the word 'dead' to mean that the heart stopped beating and the brain ceased functioning and they are not breathing any more. This work does not contain zombies but has no prejudices against those that choose to be living dead.

This book knows loss and feels your pain. This book shares your fears and anxieties. This book will explore the worst-case scenarios. This book is afraid of death, but not afraid to speak about it. This book is in mourning and trying to understand this process of grieving. This book sends you all its love. This book says it's alright to cry on its shoulder.

This book is short because life is short. The time it took for us to evolve from *Homo sapiens* to modern civilisation, from the first cave paintings and words and stories and songs to the first book and the first bookshop, is a wonder and also relatively short. Any book with the word Death in the title must be light enough to carry in your hand luggage. It must be short enough to be read cover to cover on a train up from London to Liverpool. It must be loud enough to read during the length of a good belter of a thunderstorm,

then when the storm passes and the clouds clear and the skies open up, the train doors open, and so will your heart.

These are the collected memoirs of Mrs Death, edited and compiled by me, Wolf Willeford. I'm a poet and I live in the attic rooms of the Forest Tavern in East London. Contained here are some of Mrs Death's private diary entries, some stories, poems and pieces of conversations I have had with Mrs Death; she who is Death, the woman who is the boss at the end of all of us. I share this hoping that it is the beginning of your own conversation with yourself and with your own precious time here.

When writing this I found that when people die, we write about them differently; it is as though we can speak freely; it is as though they have left the room. When writing about Death you soon realise it isn't all about Death and that you write about Life and the living: this is what I have learned whilst creating this work for you. This is a work of both fiction and non-fiction, a work of dreams and nightmares. Some names, dates and details have been changed to protect the living and amuse the dead.

This book is a matter of Life and Death.

Mrs Death's Diaries: The First Morning of the First Mourning

Present day

When I called for change, did you pass by me? Did you see me today?

I sit on a bench outside London's King's Cross station. I like train stations and airports best. I like to sit in places where people come and go. I sit and watch you come and go, you say, goodbye and hello, come and go, goodbye and hello. It's as though you are not connected to each other. Goodbye, you say, clinging on to that last glance, you give a funny little wave. You don't know that you don't have to touch to touch, to see, to feel each other. Human beings were designed to be in contact without being in contact, to communicate without words, to call each other to each others' minds. Humans still have so much to learn about

connection. But when you are in transition and whilst travelling you are tuned in to this, you are alive and alert. When you travel you wake up. You're awake and aware of changes, differences and sameness, strangers and each other. In transit you are occupied by Time and Space, by clocks and miles, by separation and reunion, your chance and your fate. Humans were built to travel, humans were made to move, to share and to migrate, just like butterflies and birds.

The history and the geography of human migration is nothing less than phenomenal.

The greatest trick man played was making you believe I was a man. They erased me and made you all believe that Death was male in spirit – the Grim Reaper in a black hood with a scythe. Remarkable that nobody questioned it really, don't you think? For surely only she who bears it, she who gave you life, can be she who has the power to take it. The one is she. And only she who is invisible can do the work of Death. And there is no human more invisible, more readily talked over, ignored, betrayed and easy to walk past than a woman; than a poor old black woman, a homeless black beggar-woman with knotty natty hair, broken back, walking ever so slow, slow, slow, pushing a shopping trolley full of plastic bottles.

Death is plastic, plastic is death.

When this all began, or when I began, was when life began, and that was when death began. Death is a bitch, Life is a bitch, but it's in poor taste to speak ill of the living. My sister cannot help herself but be Life and living and lively. LIFE! Oh she is abundant and demanding of all of our attentions. My sister is an over-achiever, laying eggs and fertilising life, shitting life everywhere, muck-spreading fertile life. Life shits life! Life is life everywhere!

I remember when this earth world was once a rock and a cold and dark place. I was there, we were there. I can recall the terrible smell of eggs; that's the main thing I remember, the stench. My sister is stinky. Death may stink of Death and of rot and decay but Life stinks too. Life and birth was always about eggs and shit. Volcanic. Sulphur. Fertiliser. Farts. The vagina awakes, yawns, stretches and burps and there we have blood, and from blood is life and love. And where there was blood there was life, and where there was life there was love, and where there was love there was life, and where there was life there was blood and where there was blood there was death. Around and around it goes, life and blood and love and death and time and space, around and around we go, spinning on this pretty blue rock in space we call planet earth.

Fish grew legs. Birds grew wings. Monkeys walked upright and tall. And that's when things got interesting for me. Because then came the first fires and the first stories, the

first poets and the first songs, the first paintings on cave walls, daubed in ash and charcoal. Life and Death, we sisters, sat side by side together and warmed ourselves by the very first fires, with the first souls dancing in the first firelight, the first handprints, stickman images of their own selves on the walls of the caves. These were the first mirrors, man capturing man's own image. The smoke rising, the charcoal pictures telling us stories of life and death, long tall tales of hunts and kills, boasted of around the fire and scratched into the cave walls. And what do they tell us? What does the painter ask us with these cave paintings? Why, surely just variations of the same questions that painters and poets have always asked us over the centuries: *Who am I? Why am I? What is life? What is death? Can you see me? Will you hear this? Do you feel me?*

I am she and she is here. I see you. I hear you. I was always here, there and everywhere. Here was I and I am I and I am she. And you might want to ask me this:

Mrs Death, who was the first person to ever die?

OK. Let us picture that first morning of the first mourning.

That first longing, that first grief, the first heavy silence, the first missing shape, the spare fur in the circle in the cave, the first empty seat by the fire. The first time a human being grieved for another human being: the missed voice, the

terrible pain, ache and longing, and there we have it, the first morning of the first mourning. And you, you're only human. Mankind. Womankind. You only have one job:

Be kind.

Kin.

You mark your place in time. You tell your tale. Time is short, a life is fast, but this picture on this cave wall may last longer than you will. You live forever in your words, in hearts and memories, in your creations and connections. The seeds you sow, the child you raise, the song you sing, the story you write with your time here. You are eternal, you are forever present in your oily DNA and your unique thumb print. You know you live now and here are all your fears: all your fears are here. And above all things you all fear, you fear me, you fear the end, you fear dancing with me, you fear Mrs Death.

Here is your proof, your evidence, the evidence you lived the life you lived, here in this time, in these words, in this story, in this song, in this painting. It is human nature to try to stop time, to try to capture a life, a shooting star, to pin the butterfly wings and snap the lid shut.

What do you have there in that box? *Look*, you say, *I have captured time, I have trapped a moment. Here I have my lifetime*

documented, a timeline made palpable, digestible, linear. Here I was born and I did grow teeth. Here I did love, and here were my tribe, my family, my loves and my loves lost. Here was my toil and struggle, my monsters, my Gods, my triumph and failure and passion. And here is my end, here my last thrill, my dance with you, Mrs Death.

With me?
Yes, with you.
Let us dance, dance, dance.

Mrs Death: The First Mourning

Mrs Death sings:

the first fires, the first fires
the first morning of the first mourning
the first shape of the first loss

the first fires, the first fires
the first birth, the first blood
the first kill, the first blood spill

you're only human
you're only womankind
you're only human being
you're only mankind, be kind

the first sunrise, the first sunset
you're only human, you're only woman
you're only man, human, be kind
human being kind human being

the first stars in the first skies
the first stars in the first skies
you're only human, human being
be kind

the first cave, the first cave painting
the first word, the first art, the first heartbreak
the first morning of the first mourning
the first loss, the first blood, the first war

you're only human, you're only woman
you're only human, you're only man
you're only human, human being
humankind
be kind

Wolf: The First Time I Met Mrs Death

Can you smell smoke?
Yes. That was what she said.
Wake up, Wolf . . . Can you smell smoke?

I was a child the first time I met Mrs Death. I was a soft, curly-haired kid filled with wonder and milk, busy with daydreams, cartoons and riding my bike. I was preoccupied with stories and comic books and gazing up at the moon. I remember the first time I met Mrs Death was also the day I lost my front tooth. I stared in the mirror and wobbled that loose tooth, wiggled it, jiggled it, pulled and poked at it until it was free and I could taste blood on the tip of my tongue. My tongue flicked in the hole, the flap of skin, the gap where once was tooth was tender. Gum. Salt. Blood. Skin. Hole. I stared at the tooth in my fingers, examined it, the blood at the root, at the root of everything is blood.

At least, I like to think I thought that, for even as a child I was quite magic. Yes I was, I was magic and I could fly, I flew every night in my dreams. I could hover above myself, I would explore the astral plane. I used to think things and then they would come true. I used to be able to see through the ceiling of the sky. I was empowered without knowing what that word meant or how to spell it. I tasted knowledge and truth in the salt of my own magic blood the first time I met Mrs Death.

And I was just like you. I was just me, Wolf, and I was just a child and like everybody else I was taken by surprise by her. I was offended by her poor timing. I was shocked at the way she flounced in, sudden and uninvited, and changed everything.

And I mean: Everything.

Mrs Death changes everything and everybody.

My world was drained. What was once colour and light was now ash and ruins. And what was once here was gone, and what was once home and safe was no more. Upside down. Inside out. When Mrs Death came knocking – hang on, in fact she didn't bother to knock, she just barged in with her calamity and chaos. And with her came the smell of death, the stinking high note of lilies and stale egg sandwiches. The clatter of tea-making and words made out

of sympathy with effort and difficulty. She came ten-pin bowling into my life, smashing over all that was good and all that made sense. I clung to the memories of my life before, as the weather turned bad and dark storm clouds gathered. It was a horror, a swirling ugly mess of feelings of loss and betrayal and abandonment. The room in my head was cold with the shadow of all that was absent and broken. The silence was screaming and I tipped my head back and screamed into it.

I cried. Of course I cried, I was just a kid and I was alone in the world. I lost a tooth one minute and everything the next. I remember I put the tooth under my pillow, but that night it was not the tooth fairy that came to visit, it was Mrs Death herself. This was my first time watching her at work. It is masterful, the way Mrs Death works. So deliberate. So merciless. There is a system: I'm not sure how it works, but I believe she must have a system and know what she is doing. There has to be a method for who lives and who dies, and when and where, but I cannot work it out. How does she choose? How does she know what's best? What is supper for the spider is hell for the fly, or something? I forget how that saying goes. Mrs Death is always too too too much. Too soon. Too sudden. Too cruel. Too early. Too young. Too final.

Mrs Death took my mother in one greedy gulp of flame and I watched. I still don't know why I survived. That last

night is in fragments. I can remember the last dinner we had together was a chicken curry. My mum made the best coconut chicken curry. Jamaican cooking is the best. I still miss my mum's cooking so much. If I had known then that that was the last meal my mother would cook for me, I would have kneeled down and kissed it. I would have only eaten half and saved the rest to eat when I miss her. I would have distilled it, frozen it, locked it in a capsule, kept it in a safe. Or you know, I would have at least said thank you. Instead I just scoffed it down watching telly. I don't remember what we watched on telly that night, I wish I could. We were being ordinary. We were being normal. Me and Mum on the sofa, we ate chicken curry and rice, we watched some telly and then when we went to bed, she said goodnight.

Goodnight, Wolfie, love you! she said. Night, Mum, love you too. She said the tooth fairy would be coming and remember to put the tooth under my pillow. *Stop reading! Switch the light off!* she probably said. Mum, what does the tooth fairy look like? *Wait and see!*

I never found out though. Next thing I knew everyone in the building was shouting and there was panic and smoke and then I was shivering and standing barefoot in my pyjamas in the road. They said there was nothing that could be done. I stood alone, frozen to the spot, cold feet on the wet pavement. Someone wrapped me in an itchy green blanket

that smelled sterile. I stared up at our building, the heat, the roaring fire, guffs of black smoke. And all around me was a chaos of blue lights, flashing lights, a scream of sirens, whilst the hungry flames grew higher and higher, scorching tree tops, tongues of flame, licking the heavens. Black pages, black ash, debris drifted, a black ash snow fell around me as our entire building burned. No sprinklers. No alarms. No warning.

I threw my head back and I howled into the charred and blackened sky. My home, my whole world was burning. I let her have it. I tipped my head back and roared and I hoped someone would hear it, perhaps that Death would hear it, hear me crying my heart out. Fat tears rolled down my dirty brown face.

Through the blur I saw a face in the smoke above me, a woman's face: the face of Mrs Death. A kind black lady's face was smiling down at me, and her smile, it was gentle, but that made me furious. I screamed at her. I was crying and crying and crying, raining tears to the river to the sea, from salt to salt, from root to root and blood to blood. And the wind swirled and echoed my pains. There was heat, a great heat within my pain, a searing heat in my heart and soul, a pain in my chest and guts and my cries were howls carried in the wind through time and space.

Now I was an orphan. I was sent to live with my grandparents: my miserable grandfather, Old Man Willeford, and my grandmother, Grandma Rose. This was the only option: these were my only next of kin, my mother's parents. My father disappeared when I was a baby and I was destined to live in shadow: I was cursed. Because once you have known Mrs Death there is no unknowing her. You have a mourning that sits inside you. It's like having a stone in your centre; time smooths the edges like a pebble in a river, but it's always there – a stone is a stone. If you've known loss, you'll know this stone, you will carry a stone of your own – this pain and weight – and you'll know what I mean. It is a tattoo under the inside of you that cannot fade or be removed. There is no unknowing the memory that a certain date and time triggers: the smell of the season, the time, the weather . . . We replay it, the jolt, the shock, the finality of death.

She followed me wherever I went. From that day of the fire onwards, Mrs Death was there in the background. She sat on the end of my bed at night as I tried to get to sleep. I was alone but I was never really alone: I felt her beside me, like a sudden urge to step out in front of a speeding train, to die was a temptation, a desire, a compulsion. Mrs Death was always there, fast as a rabbit in the hedgerow: something, someone, some energy or dark presence, darting, flitting past, seen from the tail of my eye, something you could just miss dashing, flashing by.

The night I lost my mum was etched into the skin of my brain. The memory was triggered by the smell of smoke; my recall was all ash and burnt things. I remember wishing for impossible things. I wished I were bigger and stronger and then I could've saved her. I also wished I could go back in time and change time. I now knew there was such a thing as a goodbye that lasts forever; a forever goodbye. I now understood the meaning of time, that time meant things stopped and people ended. I was nine years old when I discovered that our time here on earth had a lifespan, that our lifetime had its own limits. I learned that every one of us has a ticking clock inside. We are born with a use-by date, like milk goes bad, like bread goes blue, and then *bang* says the gun.

But they didn't tell you that when they said they loved you, now did they? No.

Bath time. When they bathed you in bubbles and lathered the soap, when they towelled you dry and held you in their arms and tickled you. When they picked you up and swung you around laughing and loving you. And when they kissed you and said, *I love you, my Wolfie, my beautiful baby*, and gently combed through and untangled your knotty curly hair with their fingers, watching over you until you fell into deep dreams. They didn't tell you that they *love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, now and today and forever*, but you will have to treasure it and hold on to it and be very clever

to remember all the details of that love for yourself, all on your own, because they all will go eventually.

We have each other: it is all we have.

It is enough and it is everything.

It is borrowed time. One by one we leave each other. We never know who might go next and when and where and why. I've often wondered how very different this living life would be if we were born with our expiry date stamped on our foreheads. Imagine that. Imagine if we were like pints of milk with our best-before dates on our foreheads. I mean, if we knew exactly how long and little time we have left to love each other, maybe then we would all be more kind and loving. Imagine if we knew our death date. How differently we would live, maybe, and yes I know, maybe not. When we do know someone's expiry date, when we visit the dying in a hospital bed, we feel guilty because of what we honestly think. Be honest here, we think, *Get well, and hurry up*; when we watch a person in pain fight and cling on, tubes and machines and needles, we also think, *Stop holding on to the hurt, stop holding on, let go, let go, let go* . . . and Mrs Death is there watching the suffering, holding on, and waiting, waiting, waiting to have her go.

It occurs to me that sometimes Mrs Death lets people live; it is as though she misses her go. I lived and I survived. It seems to me that sometimes Mrs Death misses death. Perhaps

that should be the title of my book: *Mrs Death Misses Death*. For who here knows how Mrs Death works? Certainly not us left here doing the work of all this living. Living is hard work. But we know nothing until we are nothing. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Surely only the dying know her but then it is too late. The dead cannot tell us who she is, why she is, or what makes her do what she does. All we know is that we do not live forever. Why not? Why aren't humans built to last? All I know is this: Mrs Death comes and takes our favourite ones away. All I know is she has the final word in the end. She is the boss. She has her finger on the trigger. She has her eye on the hands on the clocks inside us all. Tick tock. Tick tock. The clock inside us betrays us. Mrs Death blows the whistle, come with me now, she calls us, boat number twenty-three, your time is up.

We can try to trick her, eke out a longer go on the ride. We eat kale and cabbages and we drink raw spinach smoothies. We quit smoking and cut down our drinking. We jog in the rain and sun and snow. We do marathons to raise money for charities to give money to scientists to find cures. We take long walks in the sea air and drink plenty of water. We go to the gym and swim and do yoga and meditation . . . all to slow down that eternal ticking clock. We steam and clean and cream to slow down the ageing process. We might say no thank you to things, when we really mean yes, deep down we mean yes, yes please, I really do want all the cake and fags and rum and butter and grease and sugar and drugs

and chips and gin and chocolate and all the things that are bad for us and all the things that are fast and quick and cheap and now. But we try to apply ourselves and use moderation and take care as best we can.

We try to take our time and learn. We read about mindfulness. We look carefully when we cross the road. We do not surf in shark-infested waters. We listen to the tiny voice in our head that says *Don't get into that stranger's car*. We avoid guns: guns are dangerous, guns are made to kill people, that is what guns are made to do. It is common sense to avoid guns. If we manufacture and sell and deal out guns to people that like using guns then those people that like using guns will be able to kill you with one. Don't put your head in that lion's mouth: lions are born hungry with jaws made to crunch heads. Don't put poor people in danger by building shitty cheap housing out of flammable materials: fix the fire alarms, attach sprinklers . . . Can you smell smoke?

Mrs Death misses death. Sometimes Mrs Death misses out and occasionally she will go home empty-handed. Sometimes we think we feel her coming and yet we survive. You must've read the stories that go something like *All I saw was a light at the end of the tunnel . . .* They call them near-death experiences. That moment of feeling Mrs Death's cold fingertips brush your cheek but you live to tell the tale. It gives me goosebumps writing about this. We are all closer to our endings than we can possibly

imagine and one day we look her in the eyes for ourselves with our very last breath, that's when we know her and know what this living was all about.

Only then will we know how we lived, when we are going, going, gone.

Her failures are interesting: I feel I am one of her failures. I should have died in that fire with my mother. But Mrs Death, even Death herself, sometimes fails. She shoots past her deadline. Dead line. Excuse the pun. Sometimes Death fails. Or maybe Life fails, it all depends on how you look at it. But there are discrepancies here in this story of how Death works; small tears in the timeline, rips in the fabric, the rough material of living. This ridiculous farce and theatre of being alive.

If everything happens for a reason, then these near-death experiences must also be for a reason: they are accidents on purpose. How many 'nearly died' experiences have you had? What did that teach you? How changed were you when you had a chance to live another day? Did you know how close you were to death? How many times did you throw the dice and land in the wrong place and the wrong time? You lived. So, maybe it was the right place and right time because you lived to tell the tale. How do you know? And how many times did you not know how very close you were to Mrs Death? How many people do you know who are alive now, but they have this one story of how they nearly died? Let's

make a list of the examples of the thousands of times you nearly died, all the times you nearly, really nearly died, like the time you:

stepped in front of a bus
fell off a cliff
had a piano nearly fall on your head
choked on a fish bone
got bitten by a poisonous snake
fell out of a window
electrocuted yourself
fell down a well
almost drowned late-night skinny-dipping in the ocean
got sent to a concentration camp
were stampeded by bulls
rode your motorbike too fast and swerved off-road
faced the electric chair
fought in a duel of pistols at dawn
got attacked by a big brown bear
slipped in the bath
fell through a hole in the ice
stopped breathing suddenly cannot breathe cannot breathe panic cannot breathe panic
dived headfirst into the sea and did not see the rocks
were struck by lightning
were chosen as the next victim by a serial killer
played Russian roulette
participated in a violent prison riot

nearly got burnt at the stake for being a witch
poisoned yourself with a rotten back tooth
got caught in the crossfire in a mass shooting
ate peanut butter with a fatal nut allergy
were almost sent to the guillotine
wore a long flowing scarf in a speeding convertible
choked on your own vomit
fell over whilst running with scissors
really nearly took that other plane on 9/11
had a coconut fall on your head
saw your village being bombed
slipped taking a selfie by the Grand Canyon
had a fight with an alligator
got stranded in a fierce and fast-moving bushfire
had a plane crash into your school
your parachute didn't open
put your head in a fish tank of piranhas
fell in a trough and were nearly eaten alive by pigs
fell into an all-consuming darkness and stopped breathing suddenly cannot breathe cannot breathe panic cannot breathe panic panic panic and and and you tried to overdose and drank yourself to oblivion and then not breathing suddenly heart pounding and pounding and pounding and you cannot breathe cannot breathe panic cannot breathe panic not breathing suddenly cannot breathe cannot breathe panic cannot breathe panic really, nearly, nearly, nearly, stopped breathing.

Breathe.

The fact so many of us made it to here, to this moment, is a miracle. That your great-grandparents made your grandparents and they made it, or at least survived long enough to make your parents, and that those two got together and made you, to get you here, to this moment, to this page, to live here today and right now, to read this, to hear this, come on, it is amazing. It is AMAZING. Your ancestors survived so much, so you could survive so much. So say thank you, thank you, thank you. Look at yourself and recognise that you are here and now because they were there and then. Thank you. Living is not as easy as they all make it seem. It is not as simple as breathe in and breathe out. It is not as simple as sleep, eat, work, repeat, sleep, eat, work, repeat. It is not as easy as they all make it look. You made it to today. You made it this far, well done you, and thank you. Thank you. Thank yourself. Thank you.

This world is a dangerous place.

I have barely touched on the things we do not and cannot control directly: the greedy and corrupt politicians, the trading of arms, the war and conflict, climate crisis and ecological breakdown, the rise in extreme weather and natural disasters, famine, accidents and emergencies, sickness and disease. Just look at the news, read the internet, climate is changed, we are in an ecological emergency, the extinction of coral reefs and rainforests, the filthy oceans and air

pollution, humans are dropping like flies. Save the bees. Switch your phone off and look out of your window.

As I write this, I am looking out at Forest Gate. It is buzzing, the Saturday market, the artisan cheese and the soaps, the bookseller and the baker. Just look, look at all the people just going about the business of being alive and surviving being human. Look at them all! Look at them acting normal, like it is normal to live, and be alive on an ordinary Saturday morning. Look how they make out like living is easy, like staying alive is simple. It's miraculous! Look at the living, look how they keep going, keep breathing, walking and talking and bouncing along. Look at them, what courage, what audacity, what entitlement, what stupidity. Look at them ordering coffee and buying sourdough and avocados and photographing their lunch for the internet. Look at them catching trains and buses without a care in the world. How do they do it? You could DIE any minute. Oh shit, my heart stopped. Dead. Oh no, major brain clot. Ouch. Aneurysm. Dead. Oh no, I stopped breathing for absolutely no reason. Massively just not breathing. Panic. Dead. Random allergy to a wasp sting. Dead. I ate a peanut. DEAD. Train crash! Bang! DEAD. Why are they not afraid? Why aren't they more . . . more everything? More grateful. More humble. More something. More nothing.

There are over seven billion human beings in the world right now as I write this. And how many have been born in total

since the beginning of time? How many have died? How many births and deaths have been recorded since records began? How many were there before records began? How many human beings are now just bones in the ground or ash in the wind compared to how many are here and walking among us?

There have been times you can be sure Mrs Death is coming, you say *goodbye cruel world* and close your eyes and you cry, then you open your eyes, and you didn't die but you have a banging headache and everything is where you left it. You feel your heart thumping so hard, a booming drum in your chest, and next to you there is a smashed piano on the pavement where it missed you by an inch. Your shark-chewed surfboard is smashed to pieces beside you as you lie coughing up sea water on the sand. The convertible car takes a sharp corner and you let go of your diaphanous long flowing scarf, it gets loose and flies up and away like a butterfly. The big brown bear didn't attack you but ran back into the forest. An empty bottle of pills. Just a couple of scratches and bruises. Stick a plaster on it. Patch yourself up. Sour morning breath. A hangover. Brush your teeth, spit blood, and now you worry about the blood, and cancer, then start worrying if it is enough, if you are enough? Are you enough? You start worrying, all over again, worry worry worry, about the way you are living your life, all over again and again. I know I worry too much. I worry about it all, I mean, I have to quit smoking for a start. I have to stop worrying, but there

are so many things to worry about. I mean, I don't even know which public bathroom I can use without complaint.

Mrs Death changed everything – Death always does. She moved the furniture in my head: it's a mess in there. Everybody knows that fire could have been prevented. That hundreds of people's lives were altered by that one fire and that lives could have been saved. My mother died, friends and neighbours died, they were jumping from the windows, trapped in the stairwells, bodies cooked in the lifts. We still don't even know how many lives were lost and how many lives were affected because of that one fire, that one night. There was no warning. There are no answers. People took to the streets in mournful, peaceful protest. The people of the community spilling with anger and grief. We all said our building was a death trap. Mum said so. We are the invisible, the ignored, and we are the poor. Cheap housing, cheap politicians, cheap lives lost.

Can you smell smoke?
Yes.
That's what Mum said to me.
Can you smell smoke? Wake up! Wolfie! Wake up!
.
.
Run!