Things I Learned While I Was Dead

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Dedication to come

A Note from the Author

This book deals with issues that include physical and mental illness, violence, death, references to suicide, consent and climate change. If these are difficult subjects for you, please take the best care of yourself and know that you are not alone.

These are difficult subjects for me too. Calico's story grew out of my own severe anxiety about death, the loss of a friend as a teenager, and caring for someone I love while they were seriously ill. It was also influenced by the inequality we see all around us. How some voices are suppressed, ignored or shouted down.

Writing about the things that scare and anger me is a way of trying to make sense of the world, of life, of death. And so, although this story goes to some dark places, it is also full of resilience, love and the hope that humans can, and will, do better.

Day Zero



Calico

Cold. Dark. Sharp.

Pins, needles. In my toes. Fierce. Furious.

'Here we go.' An American man. Gnarly voice.

Pins, needles swarm through my body.

My body. Me. Calico Brown.

A mallet hits my heart, full force.

Silence.

'Come on,' says the voice.

Thud. Thud. Thud. A drum in my chest.

'Yes!'

'Stats, please.' Another voice. Soft, Spanish.

Numbers over numbers.

Warmth. Thud. Thud. Thud.

'We have some eye movement.'

'So soon? Prep for optical test.'

'Removing tape.'

BRIGHT.

TOO BRIGHT.

'Pupils reactive and responsive.' There's a blur by my side. 'Calico, if you can hear me, blink twice.'

Blink? How do I . . . ?

Oh. Yeah. Blink. Blink.

'Prep to extubate.' The soft Spanish voice is right beside me. 'Calico, you have a tube in your throat. You don't need it any more. I'm going to take it out.'

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?

My blinks go into overdrive.

'It's okay. You're ready.' Warmth on my shoulder. A hand. 'I want you to breathe out of your mouth for as long as you can, okay?'

Blink. Blink.

'Good. Now, Calico . . .'

Breathe out. Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah. Icicles rip at my chest, my throat. My body fights against the jagged tearing, silent screaming.

'It's out. Breathe, Calico.'

But I can't, I can't breathe, I'm suffocating. My throat's in shreds.

A cough rattles me, shaking my bones, my heart, my lungs . . .

And I breathe.

'Welcome back.' There's a smile in the voice.

Tiny lights flicker through the darkness inside me.

My heart. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Rivers of blood pulse round my body.

Is it my blood?

Lucas said they'd drain it all away when I died.

Fill my body with chemicals instead.

Replace it when they brought me back.

Is someone else's blood in my veins now?

Blood.

Blood from a stone.

That means impossible.

Blood.

Thicker than water.

That means family.

Family.

Mum. And Asha.

Asha. Ohmygod. Asha. Open, mouth. Speak.

My voice doesn't work.

'All right. That's enough for today,' the blur says. 'We're going to sedate you, Calico, for the next part of the procedure.' She moves away. 'Commence anaesthesia.'

No! Wait.

Numbness creeps over me. I lose the warm rush of blood, the flickers of light.

Where is she?

Where's my sister?

Where is Asha?

1.

asha

it starts at the end

it starts at the end,
what should have been the end,
would have been the end,
of any other story.

you should be
ashes
in an urn now,
asha
in an urn.
you should be
on your way now –
a soul soaring up to heaven,
a spirit seeking home –
not tethered to this body
that only ever gave you pain.

but perhaps
Death
is not the end
of every story
any more

2.

Calico

I dream of Asha.

Asha. Asha. Her name is like breathing.

I am breathing. The taste of the air – stagnant – is in my mouth and nose. The world is hazy, like I'm inside a cloud.

I push up to sitting. My muscles and joints work smooth and sure, like they did before. I blink away the haze.

Where am I?

There's no one else here. The room is stark and cold, bare concrete walls, two brown doors, no windows.

Is this the facility in America?

It's nothing like the website pictures – all high-shine white and metal. Unease squirms inside me, but I push it away. Doesn't matter what it's like, I'm here now. And so is Asha. That recruiter, that doctor – Lucas – said we'd be transported to the US. *Impossible to get anyone into the country alive*, he'd said. *But dead, you're not a person any more, you're research materials.* And he'd told me again how I'd saved Asha. How the two years of research I'd signed up for would help them cure her. How the scientists at the facility would bring us both back to life.

An icy shiver runs down my neck. They did it. I'm

awake. Alive. I can feel air moving in my windpipe. My lungs expand, contract. I can feel the rhythm of my heart, the music of being, my body singing. I never took much notice of it before. Asha's body, falling apart, got all the attention. Mine just did what it was supposed to.

Asha.

Where is she?

I have to find her.

I push away the grey sheet and blanket, swing my legs over the edge of the bed. The cement floor is rough beneath my feet. There's a scuffed wooden desk and chair to my left. Above, a shelf holds piles of folded clothes. I pick out a black cotton vest top and shorts. Loose trousers, faded to grey. Old, worn soft, they smell of faded rosemary and eucalyptus. I put them on and pull a baggy jumper over the top. Chunky hand-knitted socks. There aren't any shoes.

The first door I try slides open at the touch of my hand. The bathroom. There are mouldy spatters on the once-white walls. No mirror. I splash tepid water over my face. The towel is coarse against my newborn skin.

The other door must be my way out of here. I stand in front of it and take a deep breath, fill my lungs with air and hope. Asha is on the other side. She has to be.

I press my palm against the door. It doesn't move.

The website didn't say anything about being locked in.

I need to get out of here. I have to find Asha. To explain.

I bang and shout till my hands sting and my voice gives out. But no one comes.

It's so quiet. I can't hear another living thing.

I slump on to the floor. The concrete's chill seeps into my bones. Or perhaps it was already there, left over from the freezing.

The door suddenly slides open, startles me to standing. A bear of a man, wearing hospital scrubs, looms. Thick neck, shaved head, grey stubble on a craggy face. His massive tattooed arms are folded across a barrel chest. Tattoos of clocks without hands and a crucifix that trails into a dagger dripping blood.

I back away towards the bed, my heart hammering.

But he smiles kindly as he steps inside the room. 'Well, look at you, kid.' The gnarly American voice from when I first woke up. 'Got yourself out of bed and dressed, so soon after reanimation. That's quite something. Take a seat.' He gestures to the bed and I sit. 'I'm Earl, head nurse here at the Fates Family Facility.'

'Where's Asha?' My voice creaks. 'We came in together. She's my sister. I need to know she's all right.'

'Sorry, kid. I don't know anything about her.'

It's like he's punched me. I'm winded. The air disappears.

'Hey, don't stress,' he says. 'I don't know nothing about you, or anyone else here either. It ain't allowed.'

‘But she’s my sister—’

‘Look, kid. Folk end up here for a lot of different reasons. Best we don’t know how they lived. Or how they died. Got to be sure we treat everyone the same. No judgement. No discrimination.’ He rubs a hand over his tattooed forearm.

I take a gulp of air.

This doesn’t mean something bad has happened to Asha. Plus, if Earl doesn’t know anything about us, he doesn’t know how we ended up here. What happened that night I left Asha alone.

‘Sorry, kid. I get it’s tough,’ Earl says. ‘But you’re doing amazing. How ’bout I get you something to eat and drink.’

The door closes behind him.

I rest my head on the pillow.

Inside, I’m hollow. Empty.

Did they take something from me while I was asleep?

Not asleep.

Dead.

I was dead.

And so was Asha.

All those years of sickness, of fighting to get Asha help, and then I didn’t have a chance to tell her I’d found a way to save her, that everything would be okay.

Little seeds of sadness and doubt drip into the hollow.

What if I haven't done enough?

What if it hasn't worked?

Earl bustles back in. 'Cry it out, kid.'

Sniff away the tears. I'm not a girl who cries.

I sit up with my back against the wall, push away the sadness, push away the doubts.

Earl puts a tray of food and a cardboard folder on the desk. He sits facing me, too big for the chair. I can't take my eyes off the dagger tattoo.

'Losing it's kind of normal after what you been through,' he says. 'Enough to bake anyone's noodle.' He's so calm, solid. Like an ancient rock letting the sea wash over him. Like he's been here before, seen a thousand, thousand people rise from the dead, and it's no big deal. 'Okay?' he asks.

I nod. But the hollow inside is still there.

'You want a drink?' He passes me a glass of water.

I take a sip. It runs cold through my body.

'Here.' He hands me a bowl of murky-pond-looking stuff. It smells of mushrooms and something sour.

I feel sick. 'Err, no thanks.'

'You got to eat, kid.'

'Not this though.'

'Yes, this.' He shakes his head. 'Okay. I'll leave it here. Have some later. We'll take a look at the paperwork instead.'

He removes a tatty sheet of paper from the folder and hands it to me.



The Fates Family Foundation – HEALE Programme

Human Enhancement and Life Extension – Cryogenics, Nano and Bio Research

Mission statement:

To enhance and extend life through the development of cryogenic suspension, reanimation, and nano-biotechnologies.
'Do no harm'

Study subjects will:

- be monitored physically and mentally
- participate in nano-biomedical trials as required
- contribute to research modules: Rehabilitation, Resocialisation, Remembering.

Facility rules

1. Respectful behaviour is expected at all times.
2. Intimate contact between participants is forbidden.
3. Interaction with anyone outside the facility is not permitted.

‘I can’t even talk to my mum?’

Earl shakes his head.

My heart patters too fast. What exactly have I signed up for? That Lucas – he didn’t tell me about any of this. But then there wasn’t time. We had to move so quickly.

‘Any more questions?’ Earl asks.

‘No.’ I push away the doubt. None of it matters to me. Only one reason I signed up. To save Asha. I’ll do whatever I have to, like I promised I would.

‘You sure, kid?’

‘Okay, I have one question. When do I start?’

Earl laughs, a great rumble. ‘I like your attitude. How ’bout right now?’ He takes a notebook and pencil from the folder. ‘This is your Remembering Book. Writing helps with your manual dexterity and cognitive function. So that’s something you can be getting on with.’

‘What should I write about?’

‘Memories, how you’re feeling, anything you want, really. It’s yours.’ He shifts out of the chair. ‘I’ll let you get some rest, kid.’

‘Wait, Earl. What day is it?’

He smiles. ‘Day one, kid. Day one.’

3.

Day one. Not really an answer. I wrap the blanket round me, sit at the desk and open the dusty blue notebook. My Remembering Book. The pages are thin and yellowed, cheap recycled paper. It smells damp, like it's been stored in some garage or attic.

I've only ever written what I had to, for school or whatever. Answering questions. Or making lists. I'm not good at creating something out of nothing like Asha does. But Earl said to write my memories down and I've got a lot of those. All with Asha. And this is *for* Asha. What I have to do. I pick up the thick wooden pencil.

Day 1

My fingers find it hard to bend, and the writing comes out like a little kid's.

Everything happened so fast. I don't even know the last words Asha said to me.

I chew the end of the pencil. How do I remember?

I close my eyes, block out where I am. The dull walls. The cold.

Asha. Late summer. At home.

Sunset has painted the walls of Asha's room pink. We sit on her bed and I run the brush through her hair. It's fine and brittle, like everything about her.

'You hate me,' Asha says.

Her words slide into me, sharp.

'No, I don't.'

She turns to face me. 'You do. You can't go to the party, and it's all my fault.'

'No.' But there's a splinter of truth in what she says.

'You shouldn't have to give up your life because of me.' She coughs.

'It's a stupid party, not my whole life.'

'But you never get invited anywhere.'

'Thanks a lot.' I prod her with the hairbrush, even though it's usually true. This party is a pre–year thirteen thing so everyone's included, even me.

'Mum should've stayed in tonight,' Asha says.

'Yeah, well, she had a gig. Money! She couldn't say no.'

'I really want you to go to the party.' Asha's eyes are bird bright. 'Please. Take photos. Tell me about it tomorrow. It'll be like I was there.'

There's a glimmer inside. A bit of me wants to go. To be normal, not the big sister of the dying girl. And if it's for Asha, what she wants … 'Maybe I could go,' I say. 'For a little while.'

She smiles, moves up the bed to her pillows.

Her eyes close. Dark lashes rest like feathers on her cheeks.

I plug her phone into the charger, drip lavender oil on the duvet. Her journal's open on the bedside table, the page edged with intricate purple spirals around her poem:

truth
is not
a solid thing.
time wears rock
paper thin.
the tiny breeze
from a
butterfly wing
melts mountains
into sand.

I stay till Asha's breathing softens into sleep. I pause at her bedroom door.

Am I really doing this?

I force myself downstairs.

Mum's gin bottle is on the kitchen table. I take a swig. It warms my throat, my chest.

I am really doing this. Leaving Asha.

For her. And a little bit for me.

I step out into the fading light.

The party's in a field a mile away. I cut across the common. The tired, end-of-summer grass catches at my legs, and that splinter scratches at my heart.

What Asha said.

That I hate her.

I could never hate her. But maybe, for a minute, I didn't love her? Or didn't love her enough. Maybe, for a moment, I wished she was already dead.

Shame washes over me. I stop writing, open my eyes, get up and pace the small, dull room. This is so hard.

But I've done harder things for Asha. I make myself sit at the desk again, go back in my mind.

I'm walking to the party. I pass the old oak. Last time we were here, it was Easter. Asha sat leaning against the tree, timing me as I ran circuits, training for a race I never got to compete in. The diagnosis came the day before the meet.

The music from the party calls to me, louder and louder. It's nearly dark now. There are tiny white lights like stars in the trees. I go through a gate in the dry-stone wall. Woodsmoke. I say hello to a few people from school, but they're all in groups or couples. So I lose myself in the blur of bodies and music. There's a hum of happiness over the thumping bassline, like the earth's heartbeat in time with mine. I meld with the moment, let everything else go.

The music slows and people come together, silhouettes in the smoke.

I move to the wall, take out my phone and attempt a photo for Asha. Not sure it will come out. It won't capture the way everything feels and sounds and smells anyway.

She's not a part of this.

I'm not a part of this.

But I'm on the edge of it. The edge of life. The life I'll have when Asha's gone.

Why did I come? To see who I'll be? A different me? What was I thinking?

The stars, the lights, turn to streaks.

Without Asha, there is no me.

There is no me.