

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.