

## Are You the Wife? Narrating a Week of Loss

By Rondalyn Whitney

### Day zero

The officer says *Is this the wife?* Then *Have a seat in my cruiser.* A man lying on the ground near a silver Corolla. There are sensors and straps on the body on the ground. Someone is pushing up and down and up and down on the body on the ground, CPR. I think *Is my CPR up to date?* I say to the officer *I'm strong, I won't collapse, tell me what is happening.* My face betrays me, crumples, tears splash on my chin. I do not know the details, the story of this gruesome cinematic disaster scene are not knowable yet, but I know enough to know he is gone, I can feel he is gone. There was an accident. I see three fire trucks and police cars. I do not count the police cars. I see my son. He has called me, said *Mom, there's been an accident. Dad's unconscious.*

Someone else approaches me. *Are you the wife,* she asks. *Yes, I am the wife, ask Tell me what has happened.* She begins *The impact shattered both his legs. He had a weak pulse at first but now, we cannot get it back. We think he had an aneurism.* I understand. He died instantly when the oncoming car t-boned him on the side where he sat, guiding our 16 year old with a learner's permit, told him *when the truck passes, it is safe to take the left turn.* The EMT comes, asks *Is this the wife?* *Yes, I am the wife. We will transport him now. Meet us at the emergency room.* I will explain to people later, *he died in an instant.*

### Day 1

My husband believed in the exquisite wonderment of science, of stars and black holes and neutrinos. He deciphered tricky math problems for fun each day. He brought me coffee in bed. He edited my papers. He loved our boys. We did the NY Times Crossword together. *He believed in science* I told the ER physician – *he wanted his body to be a gift to science if the time came when he no longer needed it.* Later, the organ donor team called me with their 50 questions. *In the last 5 years, did he have sex with anyone who had been bitten by a Tsetse fly.* Tsetse, a common answer in the crossword. Should I tell her this? Should I tell her the eyes she is about to take from him could see errors I had made in the squares? Could understand when my papers said 'mad' instead of 'made' and that sometimes I got mad at him when he interrupted my reading of a poem or essay or statistical analysis to correct a typo? In the end, we would learn, those eyes gave sight to two people. His skin will cover the burns of veterans and make them smooth. His bones will be given to children who will eventually recover from bone cancer. His brain will help scientists learn more about Alzheimer's and cognitive deficits. In an hour, I will call my older son and tell him his father has died. I have to wait because he lives across the world, in Japan. Night here, day there. My son lives in the future; today is tomorrow already there.

### Day 3

My teenager and I sit at the table, my hands hold his. He says *This is the worst thing that could have happened.* No, I say, *I could have also lost you.* He says *I have something else I have to tell you. He didn't die instantly, I shook him and he moaned.* He moaned. I know this act, of shaking him, of the nuances

of his many moans. When he slept, sometimes, he would kick in his sleep. I would shake him awake and he would moan, say *have to get the ball*. He dreamed of playing, kicking balls or running to the goal. He was like that, playful. What do I say to this child? Two shattered legs his father would have never played squash again or run across the Frisbee golf course after a disc the wind had claimed as its own. *He died in an instant; he didn't suffer. It still is true. He is no doubt sitting with Einstein, in infinite pursuit of wondering, spread across the stars.*

#### Day 4

The obituary is written. Organs harvested. I begin to cry and I double over on the counter, surrendering to the weight of loss. An ache reaches into my body below my C-section scar, my root chakra. I can't breathe. My legs are unstable. I can't lift my head. Finally, I can stand. His voice reminds me, *this is entropy. Energy must always go somewhere, entropy; everything wants to return to chaos, this is chaos*. I know he, that configuration of who he was that made him my 'he' has returned to chaos, no longer a cohesive assembly of matter with brown eyes and soft grey hair and hands that knew where to touch me. I understand entropy, sirens calling to the shore of chaos. I hate entropy. I want order. I did so love how his particles were configured. Tomorrow we meet the mortician.

#### Day 5

I meet the mortician. More questions. *Do you want embalming, it's an extra \$800*. He explains the laws of cremation. I do not want to know this. *What do I want to do with the cremains?* Cremains, who knew that was a word? Bill would have known that was a word, a crossword word, a Scrabble word. *Do I have to decide now?* No. *Let's wait then*. I brought Bill's squash hoodie for the viewing. I considered keeping it to sleep beside but he would love it more. I don't believe he will stay near the earth, a ghost spirit, but just in case, he'll be a ghost in a squash hoodie that says 'Everyone loves a squash player.' No one will be afraid of that. These are the things I think as the undertaker undertakes. I am handed a preliminary death certificate. I do not want this. I am handed a form to sign about the cremation process. I do not want this. I am handed other forms. I do not want them. I hand him the obituary the boys and I have written. The undertaker hands me a form describing the cremation process. I say *I don't want to know when this is happening*. *Understood*, he says. I am handed the bill.

#### Day 6

*Let me tell you the story of my marriage*. Each morning, I would wake and roll into him, my head secure in his nook, I would say *This is my favorite place in the world*. He would reply *I love you here best too*. In his drunken sleep stupor he would, at times, clock me in the nose or eye as he lifted his arm to make room for me. In the last few years he had gotten more careful but most mornings I would say *Careful with your elbow* or he would say *I didn't hit you with my elbow this time*. It is the stupidest things that haunt you when your lover dies.

I will admit some mornings I was in a rush or life took me away and I would miss this ritual. Later, he would say—it was usually he who would say—I *don't think I got a bug this morning* and he'd open his arms and I'd put down what I was doing and sink into the infinity of him that he offered, my nose in the intersection of his shoulder and neck. It fit there, just exactly fit there. What made it so bottomless was that he, in each of those moments wanted, needed, the touch of me and to reassemble the *that* of us. He was a physicist and knew about entropy and the

attention needed to maintain particle cohesion. It's a marriage, 31 years, so sometimes I was busy—my head far away planning a day or writing a syllabus or trying to concisely report on the statistical findings of a study perhaps and I would wait or think to choose whatever it was I was doing instead but something would whisper—I am grateful for all those whisperers—*nothing it more important than this, than him, than touching this man who invites you to love him with all the love he has for you each day.* I would say, once I returned to the nook he lulled me into *We're so lucky* and he *We are indeed lucky.* If I said *I'm lucky*, he would correct me, say *No, I'm the lucky one* and you know that proves my point that it was me all along.

Last night I slept for the first time without the fit of sleep that has been here over the last few days. I dreamed I found a baby bottle in the fridge. I thought "*Oh, I can feed the baby a bottle!*" The two babies we made are now 30 and 16. But this bottle was one third full of formula for an underfed dream baby. It took it from the fridge. The powder formula had caked along the inner side of the glass like sand will in a bottle laid on its side. I stirred it with a chopstick until it blended well. I thought to top it off with the organic whole milk in the fridge, the half gallon he used each week to make yogurt. Yogurt made in the Instant Pot takes a full day including careful temperature control and releasing steam from the vessel and the eventual day of straining away the whey so it was then Greek yogurt, thick, cohesive and dense with nutrition.

He completed this ritual every week, adding the yogurt he made to his morning smoothie in the Bullet blender that he loaded with flax seeds he ground himself in the coffee grinder and three one-inch nubs of frozen banana or berries and a full scoop of vanilla protein powder. He followed routines. Sometimes he would add pineapple; he wasn't rigid. I would have bought yogurt and gone about my day but he took time for all the things he loved including his body, this configuration of matter that gave him a ride into and throughout daily life. I liked how his particles were configured. Back to the dream, I filled the bottle, replaced the nipple top, carefully screwed on and tightened its rim, and turned it up and over as we so many times had taken turns doing before. Two boys, many bottles. When I sat the bottle upright and placed it right side up on the kitchen counter, right there to the left of the sink, it was empty.

## Day 7

We count the day he died as 'day zero'. Day zero; a day of nothingness. One week ago, I was at my desk completing the fall semester syllabus. Alex just finished his summer Chemistry homework, and they were going out for KFC to celebrate. Bill came into my office. It was precisely 5:15. He sat down a glass of Malbec. I looked at the clock, having lost time as I often did. Wine meant the day had ended. He smiled, always smiled when he did these little acts of love. Little things to show me he loved me. I stopped writing (thank god I stopped writing) and said *You're the best* and *Thank you* and *I love you.* Those are the last words I said to him.

But I have so many more words to say to him. I want to ask him, *Did you believe it when you promised, before I would marry you, that you would outlive me?* I want to say *I made you promise, remember? Did you believe it when you told me you would outlive me or did you lie so I'd feel safe enough to love you and start a life and believe it enough to have two boys with you.*

Once I dreamed I'd lost him—I had fallen into the past and looked for him but he was gone. I woke with deep hysterical sobs and he drew me to him, said *I will always find you.* I believed him,

I did. *Did you lie to me?* I ask of his pillow. *Will you find me, here, left on this earth once you've tasted the stars?*

It is Thursday, trash day. I drag out the many bags to the curb and the 5-foot stack of boxes. This week I threw out all the Math lesson plans he had neatly organized and placed at his feet, under his desk, and the wire coat hangers that once kept his shirts neat and ready for the day. The boxes are from all the food deliveries and the packages from well-wishers—books on grief and of poetry, small vases, jars for magic, chocolate. I pull their emptiness out to the curb. In 31 years, I have taken out the trash no more than 10 times. The trees are beginning to turn, it must be autumn no, it's still summer, Bill will be walking through the door any minute, no it is autumn, see the mornings are cool and the night sky is clear, the bright star Sirius and Orion's belt, his sword hanging in the sky, some say it is here, from this belt, from where the gods descended, that this is more than a sword it is a gateway once ripped to allow safe passage from the heavens to the earth. Orion is the hunter in the sky, forever hunting. Orion's body forms an hourglass, his right arm reaching high to pull an arrow from his invisible quiver, his bow held strong and readied for the projectile.

I make coffee and sit on the porch, in the 5AM chilly morning nigh, face the day. Once, I saw a tree alongside a barbed-wire fence. The tree and the fence had grown too close; the flesh of the tree had spilled over the barbed wire, like a roll of fat spilling over jeans. The tree's flesh had absorbed the wire and the barbs were engulfed in the woodiness of the tree. I remember then, thinking *over time, one can learn to embrace anything in life, even barbs*. I am in the northern hemisphere, directly below Orion's constellation. If released, his arrows will fly directly overhead and toward the path I used to walk each morning holding hands with my husband. *Are you the wife?* Yes, I say it to Orion, *I'm still the wife*. I have the death certificates now. The cremains are ready, currently resting in a small corrugated box waiting for my decision on what to do with them. *I am the wife*, I must make this decision. I will place them into an hourglass, turn it up and over and up and over and leave it on the counter.

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