

Getting to Know My Husband's Late Wife Through the Words She Left Behind

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Shortly after my husband, Brandon, and I began dating, I was shocked to discover his bookshelves housed the same titles I had on mine: *Beloved*, *The Cider House Rules*, *The Book of Ruth*. The books weren't his. He doesn't share my passion for reading. They belonged to his late wife. When Brandon and I married two years later, I found myself grappling with whether to keep Sherise's copy of *East of Eden* or mine.

I was intrigued about the woman who came before me and captivated by her love of the craft. We shared a way of inhabiting and understanding the world through storytelling. Me, as a journalist and essayist. Sherise, as a fiction writer and poet who died before she had a chance to publish.

Since I couldn't read Sherise's work online, I asked Brandon to set aside some of her writing. I wanted to get a sense of her voice. "I'm sure she would love for you to read her stories," he said, hauling a giant cardboard box to my office. Inside the box were composition notebooks filled with poems, essays, and short fiction she wrote during graduate school, along with her thoughts on writing.

I wrestled with whether she would want me—the new wife—to have an all-access pass to her notebooks on craft. But when I told her sister I felt pulled to explore Sherise's work, she encouraged me. Even more compelling, the words Sherise penned seemed like a plea. "I'm

leaving behind a trail of breadcrumbs in the form of good intentions,” she wrote. In one binder, she’d even tucked a slip of paper with names, addresses, and submission guidelines for several publishers, almost like a roadmap to a destination only another writer could navigate.

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I’d always been drawn to handwritten remnants of a person’s life—the chicken scratch in my grandmother’s Bible, my mom’s penciled captions on old photographs, the letters my sister wrote me when I studied in Spain. Handwritten words help me feel closer to the person who penned them. I wanted to *know* Sherise, too, so I studied her notes like a forensic wordsmith looking for clues.

She wrote in black ballpoint ink with script so beautiful it could have been its own font. Her writing spoke to me like we were in the same room. I could almost hear her saying, “I was here. Look at these letters, the curl in my ‘G,’ the pause of the pen, the way I write with a mix of print and cursive ... just like you.” But her words stopped me cold.

“Death, get ready to tango with the living,” she wrote.

The passage came from her notes on a novel idea about two friends who were ripped from each other’s lives when one of them unexpectedly died. She called life “the great game show” and the dead, the disqualified contestants. *“Maybe that explains my hang up in a nutshell: I want to play forever,”* she wrote.

I felt like we were in a pas de deux between worlds. She’s dead. I’m living.

I wasn’t interested in learning about the life she shared with Brandon. That story ended before it began, just six months after they married. But as an investigative journalist who is also an empath, I was obsessed with her life as a writer—which books she’d never finish reading, how her half-written stories might have ended, whether she would have become an award-winning novelist.

I thumbed through her books on craft—Phillip Lopate’s *Art of the Personal Essay*, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, Joyce Carol Oates’ *The Faith of a Writer*—with her penciled notes still legible in the margins. But when I discovered her dog-eared copy of *The Book of Questions* (a title I also owned) with questions like, “*Would you like to know the precise date of your death?*” and “*If you could choose your manner of death, what would it be?*” circled in black Sharpie, I nearly dropped the book.

I never met Sherise, but I could see myself in the philosophical questions she posed in the margins, if not in the ones she circled. The date of death: March 24, 2006. The manner, according to her death certificate: blunt impacts to the head and neck. A red Jeep Cherokee

slammed into Sherise's blue Subaru Outback, flipping it over one and a half times, landing with the driver's side door flush with the concrete. The Jeep's driver, intoxicated and fresh from the casino at 8:05 a.m., survived. Sherise was dead before paramedics arrived.

Like a psychic detective working a decades-long cold case, I felt pulled toward her stories. I skimmed through them first, then tucked them away in a cabinet. But they called me. Months and years later, I would get an ethereal nudge to go back in and page through them again. Sherise even showed up in my dreams, including one where she left behind stacks of handwritten pages for me to manage.

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I thought about crafting a novel loosely based on our otherworldly connection, but as I delved more deeply into the notebooks Brandon brought to my office, my focus turned toward getting her writing published. She had dozens of half-written stories, beginnings of novels, and poems so dark and foreboding they read as if she knew her life would be cut short, as if she were living with an eye toward the end—reverent, rhapsodic, almost eulogistic.

"I sit here in my room of wonder, books stacked to the ceiling, many written by people who no longer live. What can I make of this? The first thought that comes to mind is that death for them is a non-death, if death means silence," she wrote. "They continue to speak; their words are audible to human ears, and that is their triumph. They stretch beyond the grave. Will I?"

She had such talent, such grasp of the craft. And her words engulfed me like a leaf caught in a gust of wind. I paged through her journals over lunch, read them while idling in the school pickup lane. I even found myself reflecting on *her* storylines, instead of mine, between meal prep and dinner time.

At night, while Brandon and our three sons slept, I slipped seamlessly from the world Sherise no longer inhabited into the fictional ones she created. And I began to believe her conjecture that writers defy death. Their words stretch beyond the grave like a composite of their souls.

Sherise's stories moved me. They challenged and inspired me. They also made me feel guilty. It wasn't just that I'd inherited her life—her husband; her dog; even, almost unbelievably, her teaching job—but also that I had achieved her dream of publishing.

I haven't been able to find a home for Sherise's work—yet. But published or not, Sherise was a writer. In the same way I connected to the authors of memoirs we'd both read and loved, her notes, belongings, and books became a sort of physical memoir, one that didn't die with her.

“Life is so precious. There is never enough of it. And when it breathes out, what is left will be the workings of our hands,” she wrote. “That’s where I come full circle ... it is the need to be known... the fear of not only the unknown, but of being unknown.”

I didn’t connect to Sherise from the tributes left on her memorial page, or from the stories and memories Brandon and her loved ones shared. I came to know her through words on a page—uncensored, raw, real—like we were friends separated only by space and time. In that way, maybe she does live beyond the grave like the authors we both loved, even if only through her left-behind journals and notes scribbled in the margins.

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Tombstones

by Sherise Jolicoeur

Fighting through the rows of graves

I can hear a whisper

rising,

swelling

tumbling over tops of tombstones

to reach my hopeful ears.

“Do not forget” — the whisper hisses

But like peering through static on the

Television, I can still

grasp the picture.

Then it recedes, falling across

waves of hills and

lupines — lazily bending

in the summer breeze.

The voice should not be reduced to

a whisper.

The voice should ring above all

The seasons —

spring, summer, winter, fall.

She was mine —

I could not hope to keep her,

but the wind

Reminds me of her song

and I plant a lupine

Next to her grave so that it might

bend to listen, too.

She was mine —

I could not hope to keep her

as she was — gift-wrapped,

shiny,

without a scratch.