

# A PROMISE

If you are reading this book because you have suffered loss, there is only one thing I want you to know: however you feel right now, however bleak your life is, however much despair you are in, you won't always feel this way; on my dog's life, I *promise* you.

I hope that you will read the entire book, but if you are at the stage when your mind is so wired you have the attention span of a hyperactive grasshopper and the energy of a banana slug\*, put the book to one side, use it as a doorstep or a fly swat, but hold on to one thing: you *will* emerge from this tunnel of grief to live, laugh and, possibly, love again. Trust me.

You won't believe me when I tell you that your life will be good again in ways that you could never have imagined. I didn't believe it either. I had to live it to believe it. So if you are grieving right now and can't see a way forward, hang on in there, it will all be OK in the end. Trust me, because I've been there, done that and bought the coffin. Trust me, because, like you, I've known what it's like to have a mind so warped with grief and despair that I've screamed at the sky, prayed to spontaneously combust in M&S, and walked out into the traffic, tempting fate, only to be sworn at by a swerving cyclist.

When our world is ripped apart, we have to start again from scratch. Think of it as learning to ride a bike, a bike with a bent frame, flat tyres and dodgy brakes, across unfamiliar stony ground. Good friends, perhaps family and those who know first-hand the

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\* The banana slug is said to be the slowest mollusc in the world with an average speed of approximately 0.000023 metres/second, making a tortoise look like Usain Bolt in comparison.

pain of bereavement will be beside you, encouraging you when you think you can't do it, supporting you when you wobble, picking you up when you fall and steering you in the right direction when you veer off course. One day, you'll realise that you are peddling on your own; you'll look back and see a crowd waving and cheering as you speed off into the distance. The bike will never be perfect, but it will get you to where you need to go.

This is the story of my learning to ride that broken bike across the alien terrain of Planet Grief. If I can do it, so can you. I promise you.

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Helen". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop on the 'H' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'n'.

# BACK THEN

*On August 11, I was walking with my supremely fit and healthy partner of eleven years to the scan of our first child, when he said he felt dizzy and collapsed. They tried for an hour to bring him back, but couldn't. The ten weeks since then have been a horrific blur, and everything you all say resonates so profoundly. It has been so comforting to hear your stories, people that know and understand. At thirty-two I am widowed (and pregnant) before my friends are married, and though my friends are being so kind at the moment, I am aware that they will inevitably stop asking, as life for everyone else carries on, whilst I am trapped in that horrific day when my world and the life of my beloved boy ended. ~ Sam*

On Thursday 17th February 2011, I stood on the stage in the dining hall at Dover Grammar School for Girls in Kent, to give a talk about my life as a writer of young adult fiction. I enjoyed giving speeches and running workshops, and the audience in Dover was a particularly good crowd of girls eager to learn more about the life of a writer.

I've always loved writing. Throughout my childhood and teenage years I kept a diary, wrote stories and poems for magazines, and entered writing competitions. I never yearned to become a writer because there was never any doubt in my mind that I wouldn't be. Quite how I ended up doing science to degree level and beyond is still a mystery. After a short and rather wretched spell in academia where I experimented on ferrets, a strange choice of research project for someone who sobs when she sees a one-legged pigeon, I stumbled

into advertising and marketing. Later, I wrote children's books and young adult fiction, and have now written or collaborated on 22 published titles.

To me, writing has always been as natural and necessary as breathing; getting words out of my head and onto paper has not only been a life-long pleasure, but a safety valve in times of distress. I have written my way out of anxiety and upset, diffused anger, soothed hurt and put difficulties into perspective.

One of the recurring themes of the emails and letters I have received from readers of my books was, 'Where do you get your inspiration from?' and so I always covered this in my talks. I would read out an entry from one of my teenage diaries: the same day of the same month, but written three decades ago. The girls loved giggling over my anguished prose (mostly about boys), but as I read them out, I still found some of those entries painful to recall. I used my diaries as an example of how I turned my real-life experiences into inspiration for my books. I told the girls that material is everywhere you look, everything you hear and anything you've been through, and also of something the writer, actress and comedian Meera Syal had said. I'm paraphrasing – and probably wildly misquoting – but the gist of it is that, as a writer, terrible things can be happening to you or around you, but there is always this little voice inside your head that is whispering, 'One day you will use this in your writing. *This* is good material.' Or, to quote the writer Nora Ephron's mother, Phoebe, 'Everything is copy.'

On Sunday 27th February 2011, ten days after this talk, a few days into a holiday in Barbados, and against my advice, my husband, John Sinfield, known as JS, went for a swim in the sea. As he got off his sun lounger I shouted after him, 'Be careful! I mean it!' and wagged my finger at him. I felt embarrassed that I sounded such a heckling wife, but I was sufficiently uneasy to get up and sit on the

wall to watch him leave. He walked across the beach and stood in the water, pulled up his swimming shorts and flexed his shoulders before plunging in. The shimmering, turquoise-blue Caribbean water was deceptively calm; within minutes he was swept away from the shoreline by strong currents. Alerted by tourists further down the beach, I heard him call for help and saw him waving his arms until he fell forward, face down into the sea. Bravery by other hotel guests and a passing jet ski rider brought him back to the beach, but despite attempts to resuscitate him on the sand and on the way to the hospital, he had drowned. And instead of a little voice whispering, 'One day you will use this in your writing. *This* is good material,' I could hear myself parroting, 'But I'm wearing a bikini! But I'm wearing a bikini!' as if bad things couldn't happen in good bikinis.

Almost as soon as I landed back in the UK, the Friday after the accident, people said to me, 'You'll be writing about this of course.' I wanted to. I needed to. I couldn't. For months I couldn't write anything. Internet bereavement groups and chat rooms were filled with accounts of other widows journaling their grief or writing letters to their dead husbands, but here I was, a professional writer used to churning out hundreds of thousands of words, yet completely and utterly blocked through shock.

I tried to keep a gratitude journal, in which each night I intended to write down five things that I was grateful for. Night after night I wrote only two entries: The Hound (my dachshund, Boris) and PG Tips instant tea.

There were three things that had supported me through difficult times in my life: my writing, my sense of humour and, for 22 years, my husband. All of these vanished. I can't begin to describe how terrifying that felt. I'd never believed in writer's block: juggling a

full-time career in marketing and running a small business of my own whilst writing professionally meant there was no time for being blocked. On days when I suffered from a bit of ‘keyboard constipation’, taking The Hound for a walk usually moved things along, often just as I was bending down to ‘scoop the poop’.

Physically and emotionally, I couldn’t write, but instinctively I knew that unless I did, I’d never begin to heal, and so I set myself the goal of starting a blog to coincide with JS’s birthday on 14th June 2011.

You might be wondering why I wanted to blog, why I didn’t just quietly write in a journal or pen private letters? The answer is: I have no idea; it just felt right. I had started a blog some years previously about my feelings of not being a mother. It was a private blog, not even my husband knew about it, but after a couple of entries I decided that bloggers were introspective navel-gazers who needed to stop battering their keyboard, and get out and get a life. Little did I realise that years later, blogging would help give me *back* my life.

The name of the blog – *Planet Grief* – took no time to think up. People used to say to me, ‘You must feel as if your entire world has been turned upside down.’ Irritated, I’d tell them that, no, an upside-down world implied that the UK and Australia had swapped places. This was no upside-down world; this was as if I was living on an entirely different planet, Planet Grief, because *nothing* was recognisable to me, not even the sight of my own hands on the computer’s keyboard. I was wearing a wedding ring, but I had no husband.

For that first entry, I remember staring at the white screen, feeling physically sick with fear over what emotions writing about my grief might unleash. All writers suffer from the terror of the white page at the beginning of a new project, but this took terror to a whole new level. But once I started tapping away and the words flowed from the end of my fingers and appeared on the screen in

front of me, I felt a growing sense of relief. I knew that I was never going to get my husband back, but for the first time since JS died almost four months before, I realised that my sense of humour and my ability to write had survived the most terrible event imaginable. It was the first sign of any sort of normality in my life, although there were many dreadful days and calls to the Samaritans to come.

I began to write about the little things that shook me: the loneliness of buying a single Scotch egg; the pain of tearfully dragging the wheelie bin onto the street and thinking, 'Is this it? Is my life going to be an endless and lonely battle with the bin?' And when I wrote those posts about everyday life on *Planet Grief*, the comments and private messages flooded in from others who were in the same situation, men and women who had also been sobbing over the rubbish and the shopping. There became a feeling of solidarity in grief, a sense that we were all stumbling along as best we could, together. My writing style is naturally chatty – I used to tell 'my' schoolgirls to write as if they were telling their best friend a story – and that is how I wrote the blog, as though it were a conversation between two friends. One of the most touching and memorable comments I received was when a widow wrote to me to say that when she opened her laptop and read a post on *Planet Grief*, it was as if I was sitting at her kitchen table, talking to her.

The blog became a lifeline to me and I soon realised a comfort to many. I've sobbed as I typed, pouring my heart out and opening wounds that I thought would never heal. I've wept with and for my tribe of fellow widows and widowers. I've written late into the night and first thing in the morning. I've received many intensely personal thoughts and experiences, stories that will always remain confidential. I've often written after too much alcohol, but always had the good sense to wait until the next day before posting. I've taken my revenge in print, slamming out words about those who

have hurt me, but been thankful for the ‘Delete’ key once I’ve calmed down. I’ve tried to be absolutely honest about my life and my grief, whilst endeavouring not to hurt or expose those close to me. I’ve retreated, exhausted, and popped back up to cheers and encouragement from ‘my’ tribe of fellow widows.

*Planet Grief* was never started with an audience in mind, it was started to prove to myself that I could write again, and that by writing, I could begin to heal. That *Planet Grief* had such a following encouraged me to keep writing. I never thought of it as ‘my’ blog: my role was as a facilitator, to throw out a topic for discussion based on my own experiences and let others run with it. And run with it they did.

What follows is my journey through grief, interspersed with the thoughts and experiences from other widows and widowers who took that journey with me. I make no apologies for the illogical and at times completely bonkers nature of my writing: one moment I was never going to move house, the next I was planning to shove the keys through the letterbox and move to Ireland to drink Guinness in a bar. My husband could be recalled as a saint one minute, capable of doing no wrong, only to be lambasted in print for his selfishness the next. I can quite see why those widowed longer than me told me not to make any life-changing decisions for a least a year after JS died – though the temptation to jack it all in and escape from my grief to a Greek island with a twenty-year-old, olive-skinned, long-limbed waiter was intense. If I hadn’t had Boris to consider, who knows where I might have ended up? So don’t expect any consistency in what follows. Grief does not follow a straight course, and nor does my writing.

Let’s go.