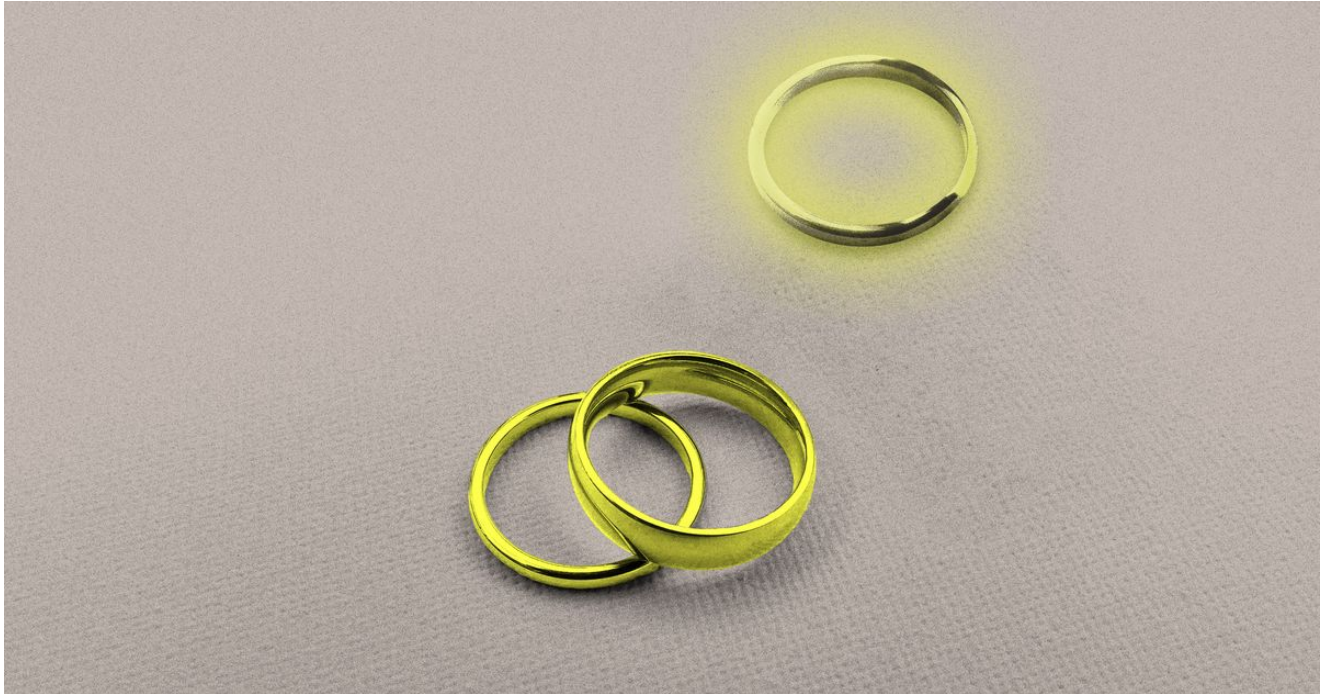


Living With My Husband's Dead Wife

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My husband's first happily-ever-after was cut short. Fifteen years into our own, I'm ready to put their story away.

Photo-Illustration: The Cut: Photo: Getty

About six months into dating Brandon, I woke up in his bed, in *their* bed, on what would have been his wife Sherise's 35th birthday. Brandon and I met online and I'd quickly learned he had a dead wife (a drunk driver totaled her car six months into their happily married life), grieving parents, and stepchildren whose father moved them out of state weeks after Sherise's funeral. Curious to know more but hesitant to ask, I Googled Sherise's name and landed on her memorial page. I pored over her pictures and saw hundreds of messages in the online guest book, including one that read, "No one can ever fill her shoes."

After untangling myself from his limbs to get dressed, I couldn't find my belt. Brandon came out of his closet holding Sherise's. The diamond cutouts and classic design looked identical to mine.

"It belonged to one good woman," he said. "Now it will belong to another."

I hesitated. To take both her man *and* her accessories? And on her birthday? As I pulled Sherise's belt through the loopholes on my jeans — it fit perfectly — I thought about how many grocery-store runs it made. How, during a tender moment, Brandon had slipped it off her waist. How she'd frantically unbuckled it when she had to pee.

That afternoon, Brandon and I arranged flowers at Sherise's grave and planted a mini-balloon in the cemetery lawn. "She's usually pretty quiet," he said, trying to get a laugh. The wind kicked up and the balloon bobbed back and forth. *Maybe she picked me to love her husband and take care of her dog*, I thought.

Our first date was over dinner. When the waiter seated us at a table by the window, I immediately noticed the ring on Brandon's right hand — his wedding band.

His disarming sense of humor made me feel safe, comfortable, seen. He confessed to his obsession with Marvel movies and action figures. I confessed to mine with books and supernatural signs. I didn't confess how much I already knew about his late wife, a writer, literature professor, and poet who died before she had a chance to publish.

After a handful of nearly flawless dates, Brandon took off the ring. A few weeks later, in one sweep, he removed the photos of Sherise displayed throughout his home. One night, he told me, "I'm ready to move on, and I want to do that with you."

As much as I wanted the same thing, I worried about fitting into his family. He'd told me that he and Sherise grew up together. His parents adored her. One night, a few months after our engagement, we sat at our dining-room table with them as I plated honey-glazed salmon. "I don't want you to change anything in the house," his mom said, her gaze fixed on Brandon as I handed her a crisp filet.

I didn't look up, but I felt my face flush.

"I can still smell Sherise here," she said, her wistfulness lingering in the air.

Brandon assured me they were just hurting, that his parents could love me, too. I wanted to believe him. I fed into their grief and indulged their every conversation about Sherise. We celebrated her birthday each year with Stargazer lilies and Reese's peanut-butter cups (her favorites). When we had to euthanize her nearly 15-year-old beagle, who had come to feel like my dog, too, I turned to Brandon and said, "We have to scatter Charlie's ashes at Sherise's grave." I felt I had to give him back to Sherise; her claim on him felt bigger.

A few months after our wedding, we converted the guest bedroom into my office. I found a box buried in the closet. Inside was Sherise's dog-eared copy of *The Book of Questions*, a novelty book exploring existential questions, with "Would you like to know the precise date of

your death?” and “If you could choose the manner of your death, what would it be?” circled in black Sharpie. Next to the book: her wallet with ID and credit cards still in the pockets, the coroner’s report and court documents, and stacks of Sherise’s composition notebooks.

“Didn’t realize all of that was still in here,” Brandon said, almost an apology.

I thumbed through the pages of her graduate-school work, tracing her blue ballpoint script with my fingertips. I could almost hear her saying, “Pay attention to me ... Look at the curl in my *G*, the way I use ampersands instead of *ands*, and the lines I crossed out because they didn’t land right.” Then I read words that stopped me cold.

Death, get ready to tango with the living.

The line came from her notes for a novel about two friends who were torn apart when one of them unexpectedly died. It felt prophetic. Rhapsodic. Almost eulogistic.

I couldn’t shake the idea that Sherise was trying to send me a message. She’d left behind dozens of half-written stories, unfinished novels, and poems so dark and foreboding they read as if she knew her life would be cut short. Like she was handing off the baton. Months and years later, I would get the impulse to read them again. At night, while Brandon and our three sons slept, I read her fiction and felt her pulling me into a world where she was still living.

Sherise’s presence didn’t remain in that box, though, or even in that room. She was everywhere: The belt — which, 14 years later, I was still wearing — became part of my daily routine. Her quilting magazines, which have continued to land in our mailbox with her name on the label even though we moved four times in five years. Her snow pants, which turned up at the bottom of Brandon’s long-unopened ski duffel while I was hunting for mine. Even after starting our own family, I wrapped our three boys, then 7 and 4 (the same ages her children were when she died), in her handmade quilts. And I began writing and publishing essays about how her loss defined our lives.

Then there was the time our youngest son, then 5, asked how he was related to Sherise as he collected dandelions to place on her grave. I explained that if she had lived, he wouldn’t exist. Confused, he said, “But I met her. She saved my life.” *It’s plausible*, I thought. When he was only 15 months old, he choked during dinner because of complications from a heart defect. He was blue, limp in Brandon’s arms until our neighbor, a nurse, performed CPR.

Was Sherise orchestrating the synchronicities from the beyond? Did she still exist in some alternate reality? Or was I losing my mind?

Desperate for answers, I asked Brandon if he’d ever considered consulting a medium — not interested. But I couldn’t let it rest, and despite the \$300 price tag, I met a psychic over Zoom. She smiled through ice-pink lip gloss and told me to take three clearing breaths.

“I see someone whose name starts with an S ... you’re not related, but somehow you’re connected,” she said.

I silently pleaded with her to continue while goosebumps rippled across my skin. “Maybe you were sisters in a past life? Or friends?” she said. “I’m not sure. But I don’t get the sense that she’s hanging around because she needs you. She’s sticking around because she thinks you need her.”

I knew it could all be coincidental. Or maybe she’d Googled me or used facial-recognition software. Still, it all made sense.

I had transformed Brandon’s first wife into an archetype, the perfect bride, and somehow made it my job to keep her spirit alive. Maybe the haunting words and fleeting run-ins with a ghost were too compelling to ignore. Or maybe I was seeking the approval from a dead woman that I couldn’t get from Brandon’s parents.

My obsession with Sherise’s life in the backdrop of our own, between Brandon’s demanding job and the responsibilities of raising three young children, had, I realized, hijacked our marriage. I was spending more time with his late wife’s musings than with my real-life husband. In November 2021, Brandon and I sat side by side on a therapist’s couch, his leg brushing against mine as I lamented Sherise’s unrelenting grip on my life.

The eerie synchronicities, his parents’ grief, Sherise’s ongoing presence despite her 15-year absence — “It’s suffocating me,” I said.

“Who are the people so focused on keeping her alive?” the therapist asked. “This obsession with her ... it’s perverse.”

I felt myself sink deeper into the couch. Sherise’s black leather belt firmly cinched around my waist.

It wasn’t Brandon hanging on, mired in a state of “What if?” It was his parents, sure. But really, it was me. I’m the one who placed her photo, forever 33 and radiant, on a shelf in our hallway. *Don’t forget what he lost*, it silently screamed.

I thought about Brandon, how he’d always embraced the life we created and never looked back. “If I was able to change one thing about the morning Sherise died, something that allowed her to live, all that’s good in our world wouldn’t exist,” he once said, citing every time-travel movie as evidence.

Meanwhile, I was still intent on reviving Sherise, through her words, mostly. I told the therapist about my obsession with her life as a writer and how, with her family’s permission, I’d even submitted Sherise’s poems and short stories for publication. *Was I striving to achieve her dreams instead of my own? Was it safer for me to live in her shadow?*

Maybe the greatest act of love — for me, for Brandon, even for Sherise — I realized, is to let the dead rest in peace. To live in the moment without compromise or apology.

I'm getting there. It has taken 15 years, but I'm finally dismantling the throuple I inadvertently created. I replaced the photo of Sherise in our hallway with a snapshot of our family and swapped her belt for a new one, a Christmas gift from Brandon. Each step forward feels less like I'm making a statement about letting go of Sherise and more like I'm claiming the beautiful life I've created with Brandon, with our boys. There are still days I flip through Sherise's old notebooks and find comfort in her words. But I can see more clearly now where her life ends and mine begins.