

Widowhood - A Young Woman's Survival Guide

Death and Destruction

Why did it happen? And more importantly, why did it happen to you?

Husbands can die in a variety of different ways; road accident, heart attack or cancer - but what unites the differing ways a man can die is the impact that it has on his wife. You are supposed to enjoy the early years of your marriage, it is the time when everything is coming right - you may well have young children, a nice house, good prospects and lots of friends who are enjoying a similarly carefree existence. Even if you are struggling financially, then you have the comfort of knowing that, with a bit of hard work, you might one day be in a position to sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labours.

The death of your spouse never figured in that equation. He was the breadwinner, the bill-payer, and your partner for better or for worse. Even if you did not get on particularly well, there is something enormously comforting about being married. You grow to rely on your husband for so many things, and even if you are unlucky enough to end up with a dull, graceless sloth, at least you know he is a dull, graceless sloth who will pick up the children for you or get a pint of milk from the Spar on his way home from work.

The point is that you feel his presence. He shares your bed; he shares your life.

Not any more.

Take all of those things, the joy, the laughter, the tearful disputes and the passionate reconciliations, take them all, stick a little black nugget of the grim reaper's best Semtex in the middle and blow them all to smithereens.

And when the dust eventually settles, what then?

It may seem a bizarre analogy, but widowhood, when it happens, is not dissimilar to being caught in a bomb blast. After an explosion the victim is left dazed and disorientated, and hearing the words 'He's dead,' for the first time will elicit exactly the same response. There is a sense of unreality, of looking down on the unfolding drama but being totally unconnected with what is happening.

You are completely numb.

You cannot cry. People around you are looking to you, expecting you to break down, but the shock of finally realising that your husband is dead has the effect of cancelling out all the normal emotional responses.

Part of you has been torn away, but you cannot feel the pain - not yet.

You can see a man who was once joined to you lying nearby. There is a bloody mess where he once was, but you feel nothing.

Why is that?

Well, basically it is the mind's way of preventing total hysteria. Your brain might allow you an

initial scream, or a bout of wailing, but it will not allow that to continue. You would go mad if the full impact of what had just happened to you was allowed to sink in. So the mind blocks it out and numbs all of your senses at the same time. The body plays a part too; it has been medically proven that the muscles in your chest contract to stop the grief exploding out of you. In my case it felt as though I had a small boulder wedged just beneath my breastbone and although I could cry, I couldn't let go completely. It is a self-preservation measure, which is short-lived, but very effective.

So don't feel guilty that you didn't cry at the funeral, or that you can look on with a detached gaze whilst others collapse sobbing all around you. You can only cry when you feel ready to cry - don't feel that you have to just because others expect it of you.

What you must understand is that your experience of death is unique, just as your knowledge of your husband was unique. You knew him better than anybody and you will know when it is the right time to mourn him.

Telling The Children

On the evening of Wednesday April 8th 1998 I put my children to bed knowing that the funeral directors were downstairs putting their father into a body bag. I had to read to both of them in a state of shock, trying not to break down and give away the fact that something was wrong. I sat beside them, my hair matted with Charlie's blood and bile, and I told them fairy stories.

And then they slept.

But I could not.

I wish I could tell you that it's not so bad, that telling your children that their father is dead is a relatively painless process, because they are young and they don't really understand the full implications of what has been said.

But I can't.

Telling your children that their father has died is the hardest thing that you will ever have to do.

I will never forget lying awake in the early hours of the morning, waiting for Rosie, my four-year-old daughter, to wake up. I knew that what I said to her had to be phrased in such a way that it didn't upset her too much, but at the same time it had to be the truth. She didn't react as I thought she would, instead she ran out of the room and woke each person in the house in turn, with a cheery,

'My daddy's dead.'



Of course you could put off the awful moment. You could tell your children that their daddy has gone away on business for a while, to give yourself a chance to prepare.

Don't do it.

Be truthful to your children from the outset. Tell them everything. Tell them how he died, where he died, what he died from.

And if you think that you can't do it, that you can't cope with the strain of telling them such upsetting news when you yourself feel suicidal with grief, think only of them and not of yourself. It took Rosie a while to fully comprehend that her daddy was never coming home. Her sister Alice was only 19 months old and so she never really questioned his absence. To her 'Daddy gone to London' and 'Daddy's dead', amounted to the same thing - he wasn't there. Small children have little understanding of the concept of death, they think that daddy is just away, and that he will walk through the door one day and everything will be all right again. In that respect they will demand enormous patience. You will have to explain to them over and over again. You will have to try to make them understand what is beyond their comprehension. And all the time you will feel like screaming. All the time you will feel like walking out of the house and leaving your children because you can't bear to shoulder their grief and their endless questions and demands for attention when you yourself are being torn apart.

But you can't walk out. You have to bear it. You have to support your children and give them love and understanding even when you feel empty and lonely and insane with your own grief.

And if you can bear it, if you can be honest and open right from the start, then at least you will have a chance.

At least you will have a chance to make your children happy again.

If you need help or advice concerning your child, you can contact [Cruse Bereavement Care on 0870167 1677](tel:08701671677) or access their website via crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Winston's Wish and Daisy's Dream are charitable organisations aimed specifically at providing bereavement support for children and young people. Their programmes are designed to bring young people together so that they might find mutual support and friendship and I can think of no

better way to help a child.

winstonswish.org.uk or telephone their family line on 0845 2030405

www.daisysdream.org.uk

What To Say To People

Telling people is hard. I sat with an address book on the night of Wednesday April 8th and I went through it, calling all the people who loved Charlie to tell them that he had died at 5.30 that afternoon.

It was hard as hell, but it had to be done.

Breaking the news to people who have known your husband for longer than you have is something that takes a lot of courage, but if you value your husband's friends as I did, then you will do it for them. It should ideally be done as soon as you feel up to it, preferably on the same day, but if you are too upset to speak to anybody, then try to find somebody close who can do it for you. The last thing you want to happen is for your late husband's close friends and family to find out via another person, because once the news gets out you will be amazed by how fast it spreads.

You should not expect people to be able to talk to you for long, because they are likely to be stunned by the news. Just tell them the basic details and ask them to call you when they can. Telling close friends and family is never easy, but it does have its advantages. Hopefully, once the initially difficult 'phone call is out of the way, you will receive offers of help and support, both of which are vital to you at this time. If you're lucky and have friends that truly care about you, then they should know the right things to say to you. They should know when to speak and when to be silent.

It is not your friends that you have to worry about - it is your acquaintances.

In an ideal world, when a widow goes to collect her late husband's death certificate she will also be given a minder, bearing a wad of leaflets.

The minder would be employed to walk in front of the widow when she appeared in public, distributing the leaflets to anyone who looked likely to approach her.

On the leaflets would be the following statement:

'Her husband has just died.

No, she didn't expect it.

This was as much a shock for her as it is for you.

If you feel too paralysed with embarrassment to talk to her about it, then please pretend you haven't seen her; walk past and think about what you would like to say to her when you next meet.

If you do want to speak to her then please think very carefully about what you want to say. I would suggest asking how she is, listening for a minute or so, and then saying goodbye.

It's not that she doesn't want to talk to you, it's just that she can't. She can't talk to

anybody at the moment without breaking down.

Thank you for your co-operation.'

Of course it would be impractical, but it would save an awful lot of distress.

It is sad but true that some of the most painful words you are likely to hear will come from well-meaning people who feel that saying something totally inappropriate is better than saying nothing at all. Glib statements are painful at the best of times, but in the first few days after your husband's death they will be unbearable. Ill-chosen words have the ability to penetrate the numbed-out world that you inhabit like tiny darts of consciousness. They wake you up; they remind you of what you are and where you are. They hurt.

C.S. Lewis compared the feeling of having to appear in public soon after being widowed as a kind of leprosy. People will avoid you, not because they are afraid of coming away from a handshake with more fingers than they started with, but because they find it too difficult to know what to say. But sometimes it is impossible to avoid people. You cannot hide away forever and when you do go out there will be nothing about your demeanour that suggests anything other than total normality. You will have to tell all sorts of people news that will shock them into silence. You will have to say it in shops, at school, on the bus and at work. You will have to make yourself say words that wound you with every syllable. You will have to repeat those words over and over again through your own tears and the wide-eyed disbelief of the person you are telling.

And somewhere along the line there will be an un-thinking person who listens to those words and then says, 'There are so many people worse off than you.' Or 'So, how are you managing without a husband?' Or, 'You'll find each day will be a little easier.' Or some other rubbish that they have picked up in a supermarket self-help book and which they feel qualifies them to tell you how you should be feeling right now.

You can't escape them - all you can do is pity them, turn your back and walk away.

People use platitudes as a replacement for personal experience, substituting insensitivity for insight.

Platitude shmatitude.

If in doubt, don't say it.

The Funeral

The funeral is something that you will have to face, regardless of whether you feel up to it or not. The day itself will pass in a blur, but what leads up to it will seem interminable. You will feel under pressure, because there is only a finite time allowable before your husband must be interred by burial or cremation. There are a whole host of arrangements to be made: order of service, hymns, readings, flowers and choosing a coffin. All of these things need thought, and thankfully there is a very good website which gives you all the relevant information about what to do after the death of your partner, from form filling to funeral arrangements. The site is interdenominational, well laid out and can be found at www.ifishoulddie.co.uk/

This may be the first time that you get to meet the vicar/rabbi/priest - and you may not like him or her when you do. When Charlie died, I contacted the vicar who had married us nine years previously, and he very kindly agreed to conduct the service. I did this for a very good reason; I

had no connection with the man who had replaced him and I knew that he knew nothing about Charlie. It was vital to me that the man who spoke about Charlie to a church packed with his closest friends, could do so with conviction and feeling. He did it beautifully, and I will be forever in his debt for the kindness that he showed to me at such a difficult time.

The service has to be right. I have a friend who thought that she was in the wrong church when the vicar began to speak about her late husband; the vicar hadn't known the deceased man but my friend had presumed that he would deliver a suitably moving tribute - and he did, it made her want to move out of her seat and run screaming from the church, because it bore absolutely no relation to the man she loved.

She still talks about it with horror to this day.

So think very carefully about what it is you want to say about your husband, and think also about what he would have wanted. Don't be afraid to tell the vicar - they can be quite intimidating people but you have to remember that they are there to serve you and the best interests of your late husband. If in doubt - cry. It would take a very hard vicar indeed to ignore the wishes of a distraught young widow.

You may be wondering whether or not to let your children attend the funeral. All I can say is if they ask to come then let them. Let them see their father being buried, let them see his coffin in the crematorium, because if you allow your children to see what some might consider too upsetting for them, you stop them seeing their dead father on the bus, or on a train, or riding in the back of a taxicab.

Not attending his funeral will result in a continuation of the disbelief about his death. My husband never got over the trauma of not being allowed to attend his own father's funeral, and I was determined that Rosie would not go through life as he did, believing that daddy hadn't really died, but was a secret agent on a very special mission. It is up to you entirely what you choose to do, but remember, what happens on the day of the funeral has the power to induce peace of mind or torment for a very long time afterwards.

The chances are that you will have a house full of people immediately after the funeral. Let them help you. Let them do the cooking, the housework and most importantly if you have children, let them take them off your hands. Use them, because they will have to leave you eventually to get on with their own lives.

I was 33 when Charlie died and it was my age, and the fact that I had two young children that shocked people most. You will find that you get inundated with letters of sympathy and often from the most unexpected people. And as you will soon come to realise, the reason that so many people express concern at your plight is that they find it hard to believe that a man in his prime can die, leaving a young wife behind him. Sadly cancer and car accidents, heart disease and head trauma do not legislate for the age of their victim.

The reaction that your husband's death provokes will be initially overwhelming. If you find it too hard to read all the letters of sympathy - don't. Don't do anything that you feel that you cannot cope with. Put the letters away and wait a while - there are many more pressing matters that you have to attend to.

In an ideal world we would all live in a close-knit family group, which would provide us with endless love and support, thus negating the need for us to seek help elsewhere. If you find yourself in that position then you are very lucky - you can skip the next bit because it doesn't affect you.

For the rest of us, the reality of our family situation ranges from warm and caring, to positively dysfunctional. You may have family who are emotionally close but geographically distant.

Conversely, you may be stuck with a stepmother who lives on your doorstep, makes your life unbearable and that you wish you could tell to **** off and leave you the hell alone.

My point is this: if you don't have family whom you can call upon to help you, then you have to rely on your friends.

When the funeral is over and your houseguests have left you will be amazed by how many people come forward and offer help to you. Most people say the same thing, "Just give me a call if you need anything - anything at all".

This is not helpful to you. What you need is help of a practical nature, and help that is freely given without you having to ask for it.

But how do you ask for help?

You can't do it, can you?

One of the emotions that you will experience first is a feeling of worthlessness.

Total worthlessness.

You have been left alone, but you are too crucified with self-doubt to ask anybody for anything.

You may think that there are no positive aspects to being widowed at a young age. You are wrong.

This is the point when you will learn the first of the valuable lessons that widowhood is going to teach you.

Real friends don't have to be asked.

I would hate anybody to think that I did not appreciate every single act of kindness that was shown to me in the first weeks of my widowhood - I did and I still do.

The point that I am trying to make is that whilst it is very heartening to receive offers of help, what you need more than anything else is not an offer, but a deed.

Finding a casserole on your doorstep will mean more to you than any amount of sympathetic words. Being asked out to lunch with your children will make you feel more loved than a hundred offers of help.

And why is that? Because you didn't have to ask.

I have friends in my village who cooked for me when they knew that I didn't have the heart to cook for myself. Four years later they still come over every so often, bringing with them something delicious on a tray. They love me and they don't expect anything in return, they do it because they loved my husband and they just want to make me happy now that he is gone. That sums up the true nature of friendship to me, and if you are lucky enough to have friends like mine then I know that you will find the first few weeks a whole lot easier to cope with.

Of course you cannot make people help you in practical ways. If all you ever get are offers of help, then you might have to pluck up the courage to ask.

If somebody offers to look after your children, then drop a note through their door asking them to have them on a certain day - that will give them time to think about it and it means that you don't have to ask them face to face. If they really meant their offer then they will make every effort to accommodate your wishes. If they say that they cannot help you on that particular day, but offer help on another day, then you know that they do genuinely want to help. If, however they find an excuse and never offer to help you again, then you know that they were not sincere in the first place.

Money: Where is the Will?

Funerals are expensive things. So are solicitors, gravestones, burial plots, cremation vases and wreaths. Money will be haemorrhaging out of your bank account and you will be too distracted to keep an eye on where it is going.

Many women leave all the financial aspects of the marriage to their husband, so it comes as a great shock to them when they have to sit down and go through all of the household bills and financial affairs.

It pays to be methodical. If you cannot think straight then find someone you trust to sit with you whilst you sort through all the documents that need to be looked at. But be warned – if your husband was a secretive man then you may find something that you didn't bargain for.

I have a friend who had to go through his father's chest of drawers in the garage because he didn't want his mother to discover the secret stash of porn that was hidden there. Even though he knew of the magazines existence, he was a little surprised at their content - in particular, one volume rather charmingly titled 'Knotty', which on closer inspection detailed various couple's fascination with being bound up with household string.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that you will find anything quite so bizarre, but if you had any suspicions about your husband then it might be wise to brace yourself just in case. And if you do find anything in your husband's personal belongings that point to secret indiscretions, then feel free to shout at his ashes or get up in the night, drive to the cemetery and jump up and down on his grave. He can't feel it - and if it makes you feel better then all well and good.

When you decide to begin sorting out your husband's financial affairs, the first and most important document that you must find is his will. If you had joint wills then you will know what's written in them. If he made his own will then you will need to know who are his beneficiaries. Don't worry if he didn't make a will because when a man dies *intestate*, and leaves less than £125,000, then his estate is automatically forfeited to his lawful wife. Things get complicated if his estate is valued at over £125,000, and even more so if he left over £220,000 - in this case parents, brothers and sisters are liable to become potential beneficiaries. Under these circumstances it would be prudent to consult a probate specialist, in order to ascertain exactly what may be due to you. The law is rather harsher if you were not married. As his common-law wife you have a duty prove to a court that you have a *morally justifiable* claim on your partner's estate, before the judge will grant you a share of his assets.

I will not go into that particular scenario any further because I am not qualified to do so, but if you need free information on matters of law, then you can visit the [Citizen's Advice Bureau](#), your local library or any independent advice centre bearing the Community Legal Service Logo. Any reputable solicitor will be able to advise you fully on your rights, but obviously they will charge you for the privilege. If you are unsure of which solicitor to choose, you can call [The Law Society](#) on 0870 606 6575 or visit <http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/> and they will help you to find a reputable solicitor in your area.

Legal advice is expensive, but unless you are willing to put yourself through the trauma of undertaking a painstaking and complicated trial by paper, you will have to employ a solicitor to do it for you. Having been given the will, your solicitor will then ask you to provide documentation regarding all of your husband's assets, including such things as tax returns, savings, pension etc. It is vital that you can produce everything that is required, as no money from the estate will be released to you until every penny is accounted for. This process is called a *grant of probate*, and it may take a while to obtain – especially if your husband had outstanding debts that you were

unaware of. The bank will freeze your husband's account and put a block on any credit cards in your name that draw from that account. [The only funds that can be legally drawn from a frozen bank account are those needed to pay for funeral expenses.](#)

The freezing of accounts does not apply to any held in joint names, so if you did share a savings account or bank account then you will be free to draw out funds as normal.

Debt

The main feeling that will pervade your confused mental state at this time is one of panic.

Panic about money.

You will be wondering how you pay for everything; the mortgage, household bills and loans. You will be wondering how you are going to earn enough to live on now that your husband is gone. If you were not employed at the time of his death, then you are going to have to think about getting a job, and if you have children then you are going to need someone to take care of them whilst you are at work. All these things need addressing; figures and bills will swim before your eyes but you will be too out of it to make any sense of them.

What you need more than anything at this time is sensible financial advice and there are many ways of getting it before you have to resort to paying for the services of a financial advisor. If you are lucky your parents will be desperate to help you in any way they can - so let them. If they offer to give you a loan to help to tide you over then take it, even if that means that you have to endure your mother's cooking every Sunday, or listen to your father telling you what a wastrel your husband was. And if all they offer is advice, then you should listen to them – unless they are both compulsive gamblers, in which case I think it might be best to ignore them.

Your husband's employers may well offer assistance and, once again, you should take it.

Alternately there may well be a friend who has knowledge of financial planning, and if they are trustworthy you should make every effort to seek their advice. But if there is nobody that you feel you can turn to at this time, you will have to seek the help of strangers, and you should think very carefully before you put your affairs in the hands of somebody who may not have your best interests at heart.

[This is the time when you are at your most vulnerable.](#) You will feel like kissing the feet of anyone who offers to give you anything, and if they are twisted enough to have an ulterior motive then you will not see it coming. You wouldn't see it coming even if it telephoned you beforehand to tell you it was on the way, and then arrived wearing a t-shirt saying, 'I'm an ulterior motive and I'm going to take advantage of you.'

So I would strongly urge you to seek help at the [Citizen's Advice Bureau](#).

<http://www.nacab.org.uk/> They employ experts in a variety of different fields and you will be amazed at what they will be able to help you with.

You will soon discover that almost every financial aspect of your husband's life that you try to bring to a close will require a death certificate. The bank will need one, your husband's credit card providers will demand one in order to close his account, and his pension provider will require one. I would strongly recommend you get at least three copies, so that you can send out more than one at a time, because photocopies will not be accepted. You will get the death certificate back eventually - but always make a copy of any correspondence concerning your husband's affairs, because with the amount of mail coming and going it is easy to lose important documents – and in your position you can't afford to do that. What you need right away is a cash lump sum to tide

you over and you will get one courtesy of the government just as soon as you have informed them of your entitlement. You can make a claim at your local Social Security office and this should be done as soon as possible. The **lump sum** presently stands at **£2000**, and shortly after you have received that you will be assessed for your regular **Bereavement Allowance**. If you are in receipt of a means-tested benefit you may also be entitled to a funeral expenses payment from the social fund.

The benefits system can be very complicated and it is vital that you find out exactly what you are entitled to. Hertfordshire County Council Money Advice Unit have produced a very useful and easy to understand fact sheet on Bereavement Benefits, which can be found at

<http://www.hertsdirect.org/benefits/bacpdf/?view=Benefits>

You can also contact Jobcentre Plus, the Department for Work and Pensions, or your local Social Security office for more information.

When you collected the death certificate, the registrar should have given you a leaflet - **IR23 Income Tax And Widows** and if not you can pick one up from your local tax office. The leaflet will explain about your taxable status as a widow, but once again if you are at all unsure about anything regarding benefits payments or tax, you should contact the Inland Revenue at:

<http://www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/> or call in at your local **Citizen's Advice Bureau**.

<http://www.nacab.org/>

It is most important to find out if your husband had life insurance, because that will make a big difference to your financial situation. If he died at work you might also be entitled to a **Death In Service Payment** - the amount that you are awarded will depend on how much your husband was earning at the time; it will be a percentage of his annual salary, but the exact amount varies from company to company. Once again, the **Citizen's Advice Bureau** will help you with any queries on this matter or any other financial advice that you might need.

I have to admit that after Charlie's death I found the prospect of finding sound financial advice extremely daunting. I was lucky, in that I had a personal recommendation, which I believe is vital when you're dealing with your future financial security. I have used the same financial advisor for the last seven years and I trust him implicitly. He's easy on the eye, has a good sense of humour and didn't seem at all phased when, in a moment of madness, I told him I wanted to fly to Las Vegas and put all my money on 23 black. Andrew MacDonald is a wizard with investments; he didn't let me squander my money in a casino, but instead has tailored my modest savings in such a way as to provide me with security and growth for the future. He has recently come up with a cunning plan which uses a traditional product in such an innovative and ingenious way that it makes my head spin just to think about it. I have absolute faith in his judgement and I feel happy knowing he's looking after my money.

If you need sound financial advice then it always pays to go to an independent and unbiased financial advisor. There are hundreds to choose from, but if you need a personal recommendation then I would suggest trying Andrew MacDonald at Decifa. Tel:01926 832999

Email: Andrew@decifa.co.uk

The Perfect Diet

If you could patent it you would make a fortune - the only way to lose weight without ever having to try.

You will soon discover that weight will fall off you. Grief will suppress your appetite and render all food tasteless - that is if you can get anything past the big boulder wedged beneath your breastbone. If you loved cooking, as I did, and loved the fact that it made your husband happy, then you will never want to cook anything again - after all, where is the pleasure in cooking for yourself?

You have to eat, but your body will not demand to be fed. Your body will be silent whilst your mind tries to deal with keeping itself from breaking under the strain.

So you will be slimmer, but madder - Kate Moss on speed.

But it won't last - unless you let it.

It will be difficult to visit the supermarket. Strangely, it was when I had to do the shopping for the first time that the reality of my situation finally hit home, and it may well be the same for you, for whilst you are preoccupied with the funeral you will not have time to really think about what follows.

Shopping takes thought, it will also take you past rows of razors, aftershave and beer, and when you see them, you will want to cry.

Crying in Tesco's is a difficult thing, but it might stop you running down the aisles, tearing at your hair and screaming 'Get that Brut away from me.'

If you do this, people may get the wrong idea. So go ahead and cry if you feel like crying - they can't touch you for it - you're a widow.

It will take time to adjust to buying just for yourself, or for you and your children. It will take courage to enter the 'sad meals for one' aisle and fill your trolley with ready meals. It is the first admission of being alone - and it will hurt.

If people are kind enough to invite you out to eat in the early weeks then try to take up their offer - even if you don't want to go out. But avoid dinner parties at all costs. If I were asked to choose the single worst experience that I had in my first month of widowhood, it would have to be eating dinner with four married couples, three of whom I had only just met.

It was excruciating.

You may find, as I did, that you say things that really oughtn't to be said in polite company. This is because we all rely on our husbands to give us a look when we have over-stepped the mark. My husband wasn't seated opposite me, so I blithely launched into what I thought was a humorous story, but which ended not with a laugh, but with a deathly hush, punctuated only by an occasional, 'Oh my God, that's really horrible.'

I wanted so much to be normal that night. I wanted them to like me. I wanted them to see that I was just like them. But I wasn't like them. What had come out of my mouth was only an expression of how mad with grief I was. I should have stuck a fork into my hand as an encore - I wouldn't have felt any pain, and the people around me would have been able to see that they were sharing a table, not with a well-balanced but recently widowed young woman, but with a mentally unstable social liability.

You will say things that you didn't mean to say. You will sit looking with envy at the affectionate glances that pass between couples. You will be subjected to stuttering sentences from people too frozen with embarrassment to know what to say to you. You will die a thousand deaths.

So don't do it.

Visit friends in whose company you feel safe. Don't mix with strangers at this stage, because much as you think you might be ready to meet Mr. Right, you will be too mad to make rational

judgements. And when you do go out for the first time, make sure you have a box of Kleenex in the car for the journey home. Because even if you have spent the whole evening laughing, when it comes to driving home alone, it will hit you again. You have nobody to discuss your evening with. You have nobody to make you a cup of tea before bed.

He's gone and he's never coming back.

Now try to go to sleep.

Sad, Mad and Dangerous to Know.

One thing that you will almost certainly find is that you need help to sleep. I found it impossible to sleep in the first couple of weeks and, much as I tried to avoid it, I had to resort to sleeping pills. I wasn't trying to be brave, I just don't believe in taking them. But I had to take them or else I would have collapsed, and when you have small children to look after you need all the help you can get.

The doctor will not give you a big bottle of pills because he will be aware that you might try to overdose. I certainly thought about it in some of my less lucid moments, until my doctor cheerfully announced that the ones he had prescribed were not good for killing yourself. Anyway, I told him I had a couple of shotguns downstairs, so I wasn't particularly bothered, and because he was a good friend of mine, he knew I was only joking...

But I wasn't.

If I had one piece of good advice that all my experiences have taught me, it is that you should think very hard before you start taking anti-depressants. I'm not suggesting for a moment that you shouldn't take them, if that is what you feel you need to get you over your grief. Your doctor will almost certainly offer them to you and they will help you to feel better.

But let me tell you a good reason for not taking them. Your grief, were it a purely physical symptom, could be seen as a large, black boil. You feel it constantly and although others can't always see it, there it sits, festering under your skin. Now, you have a choice: you can suffer with it every day, until it eventually bursts of its own accord and clears up, leaving you healthy and free of scars. Or, you can take a pill, which will dull the pain, allowing you to carry on about your daily business without the constant ache and occasional agony that the boil visits upon you. But the boil is still there, eating away at you beneath your skin. In it is stored all the anger, the hurt and the frustration that you should be feeling, but the nice pill that you eat every day takes all that away.

You may have a boil, but you are a smiley, happy, functioning individual.

And years later, when you decide to stop taking the nice pill because you are over the worst of it, the boil bursts. And out will come every feeling that you have ever suppressed, and all the grief that you didn't allow yourself to feel because the thought of it was too overwhelming to deal with. But you will deal with it now. It will hit you when you least expect, it will hit you hard and you may never recover from the shock.

I am not an expert in counselling or medicine, and I am not advocating ignoring the advice of a doctor. But you should realise that grief is a physical and mental process, which you have to go through in order to make yourself happy again. It is hard as hell. It is hell, and when you are going through it you will think that there will never be an end to it.

But there are ways of making it easier.

It will come over you every so often like a big black cloud and it will weigh on you more heavily than anything you have ever experienced before. Turn a king-sized mattress into an overcoat and try walking around in it - that is what it feels like. You will be mad with it at times, you will scream and shout. If you have children, you will scream and shout at them all of the time and you will hate yourself after they have gone to sleep. You will sink down under the weight of it and you will feel yourself suffocating, but you just can't get it off you.

People will walk up to you in the street, but you will not be able to look them in the eye, you will only look down, because that is where you are. If anybody tries to be nice to you, you will feel your eyes welling up; if people are nasty you will want to scream at them, 'How can you say that? Don't you know what's just happened to me?'

I used to want to be pulled over by the police for speeding; I wanted a fresh-faced officer to lean into my car and say, 'Do you realise what speed you were doing.' And I would look at him and say, 'Yes officer, I do realise, now why don't you fine me - or better still, throw me in jail. In fact, why don't you just go ahead and hang me for being so reckless - you would be doing me a real favour because my husband's just died and I can't bear to be apart from him any longer.'

Grief makes you quite, quite mad. But it does so for a reason - so let it.

Be mad. Scream, shout, wail; embrace it.

And when you think you are over the worst of it, it will hit you again.

I was driving my children home from a party one sunny afternoon in July, the car was filled with the sound of my daughter's laughter, when suddenly, there in my head was the noise that my husband made when he was dying. It completely pole axed me, and it was all I could do to drive home. I was dazed for the rest of the day and I spent the night screaming and crying and shouting at the terrible injustice of losing such a wonderful man.

Why had my mind locked away that hateful sound, and then let me hear it again on such a happy day?

Why? Because it wanted me to expel the massive hurt that was still sitting inside me.

You can prompt your grief. When you feel the cloud looming overhead, bring it closer by listening to sad music and looking at old photographs. Make it come over you, because each time you feel it, the next time you will feel it less, and in time you will hardly feel it at all. And if you can go through all that, you will come out of the other side a much stronger person.

I know myself now. I know how strong I am, I know that nothing that I face in the future will be able to defeat me, because the death of a man that I loved more than my own life did not defeat me.

I urge you to consider your options very carefully, and I wish you luck.

How Can You Help Your Children?

Coping with your own grief is hard, but it is nothing compared to dealing with the grief of a child. What you do and say to your children in the early weeks and months will help to shape who they are, but also has the potential to damage them for the rest of their lives. Young children do not have the capacity to vocalise their emotions, so you have to give them a way to tell you how they feel. The best way to do this is by stapling a few pieces of paper together and giving it the title, 'A

book about how I feel about my daddy.' Tell your children that they can draw in the book whenever they feel sad about daddy. I did this with Rosie and I was amazed at the pictures that she produced. It is hard to see your child drawing pictures about death, especially when he or she skips home from playgroup with a big painting of a graveside scene, but you have to understand that it is the only way children have of telling you how they are coping, and if all the people in the picture are smiling, then you know that you are doing something right.

Children learn by example. You must let them see you cry, and in that way they will know that it is all right for them to do the same. I have a friend who was told by her stepmother that she could not cry when her father died. She was only nine years old, and that part of her emotional psyche shut down from that day onwards. She found that she could not allow herself to release any sadness. She never cried, her sadness was stored inside her and the frustration of keeping it there came out as anger. She was so angry as a child that she used to pick fights with the large Alsatians that roamed her estate. She wrestled them, and she won.

It has taken years of counselling for her to be able to release what her stepmother made her lock away. But it was her stepmother who should have been locked away.

That is an extreme example, not all children have cruel stepmothers - some have loving mothers who simply cannot allow their children to see that they are sad. Perhaps the most damaging thing for a bereaved child is never being allowed to talk about his or her father's death. If children cannot mourn properly, then they will spend the rest of their adult life trying to recover from the emotional scarring - and some people find that they never recover.

People will find it unnerving if your child talks openly about death, but you should never discourage a child from being open and honest to save the embarrassment of an adult. Rosie would walk up to total strangers and tell them that her daddy had just died. Some of the people that she spoke to were amazingly kind and some just couldn't think of anything to say, but the point is that she felt able to express herself.

She had a little more difficulty at school, because although her teachers were very patient with her, there was only a certain amount of attention that they could devote to an individual child before they had to get the class back to normal. It was only when I was called in to see Rosie's headmistress and form teacher that I knew that she was getting into trouble. She was clearly trying to get attention and couldn't understand why she was being punished for doing so. She was also being taunted in the playground, which is a standard reaction to a child who is seen to be 'different'.



Young children cannot dress up what they are feeling with artifice and invention - they just come right out and say what's on their mind. My daughter often found comfort in the words of her classmates, but more often than not she would come home in tears because somebody in the playground had been cruel to her. There is nothing that you can do to protect your child from being hurt at school, all you can do is offer comfort and reassurance at home and try to explain the reason why other children say hurtful things.

Difficulties at school will compound all the problems that you will experience at home, but it is vital that you communicate with members of staff and make them aware that your child may need to be shown patience and compassion, long after it is deemed necessary to treat him or her like the rest of the class.

Some of the most remarkable people I know lost their father when they were young, and also some of the most damaged. Children will find strength of character that will last the rest of their lives, if you only give them the chance to look inside themselves and discover it. And if you try to stifle that need for self- enlightenment, if you keep them in the dark, then that darkness will overshadow everything they try to achieve in later life.

So let them go to the funeral if they ask to do so; let them talk until they have exhausted all of their questions, and if all they do is ask the same question over and over again, then you must answer it, over and over again.

Your child's grief will not necessarily coincide with your own, it may come out a year or so later. If your child begins to display uncharacteristically antisocial behaviour, as my own daughter did, then you have to realise that they are doing so because they want you to react. If all you do is get angry, as I did, then you are not seeing what they are trying to make you see. It took a friend to open my eyes, and make me realise that Rosie was crying out for my undivided attention. She wanted to be treated as an individual, she wanted me to stay with her as she fell asleep each evening - she wanted to be made to feel special. It was so easy to remedy the situation, but if I hadn't been made to see what I was doing wrong, I might have ended up with different and difficult child, instead of the balanced and loving daughter that I have now.

Once again www.winstonswish.org.uk will be able to give you expert advice on all aspects of helping your child.

The website www.childalert.co.uk is dedicated to child safety and wellbeing. It offers information, education and communication to parents about all aspects of parenting. The aim is to encourage all families with young children to be better prepared and more alert to the dangers that exist, often unwittingly, in and around the home. In particular Childalert gives advice on topics such as Internet Safety, Stranger Danger and Personal Safety.

What to Do With His Things

If you can't have him, then you can still have his stuff. You can go to sleep with the shirt that still smells of his aftershave; you can wear his jumper; you can see his toothbrush on your basin and imagine that he will walk in one day, pick it up and use it, just like he always did. And if that's what it takes to make you feel better then so be it. We all need something to help us through our grief, and having something that your husband once wore, or used, or loved, will give you comfort. But it will not bring him back.

Don't let anybody tell you what to do with his belongings. If you want to throw them all out the day after he is buried, then do it. If you want to keep some of his suits, his razor or his toothbrush, then do it. Nobody can tell you when is the right time to clear out his old jeans and boxer shorts. Nobody.

I kept the turned wooden shaving bowl that Charlie last used on the day that he died. I used to look at the swirl of dried lather and imagine the badger bristle shaving brush in his strong hand, curling lazily around the bowl, picking up a soft, pink mound of Trumper's rose shaving soap and rubbing it into his stubbly chin.

I saw that image every time I passed the bowl. I kept the lid on it to preserve the memory. Then one day Rosie found Charlie's shaving brush and ran it around the wooden bowl, just as she'd seen her father do so many times before, destroying the remnants of his final shave; destroying my sacred, tangible, memory of him.

It was nothing special to her; she didn't know the importance I had placed upon it. I am ashamed of my reaction. When I saw what she'd done I screamed at her and pushed her out of my bedroom.

And all for what?

For a bit of dried lather and nothing more.

Memories are not kept alive in turned wooden bowls, they live on in your heart and in your head. If you keep your bedroom as an untouched and untouchable shrine to your late husband, then how can you ever hope to move on?

People are not things. A man is not his suit or his shoes - he may have loved them, but once he is gone they are no longer part of him, they are inanimate objects that grow dusty under the bed and moth-eaten in the wardrobe.

When you can bear to give up the things that were his, then you are starting to let him go.

You should let him go.

Give his clothes to a charity shop; make his old shirts into painting overalls for your children - but only when you feel ready to do it. Keep the things that were special to him. Keep his fountain pen, his cufflinks, and his favourite suit. Keep his memory alive by talking about him, keep it alive in the minds of his children and when you are ready, let his things go.

The Six-Month Low

I know I have already said that grief will come and go over a long period of time, but in terms of what to prepare for, I feel I have to mention the six-month low. Six months is the time that people will start to leave you to get on with it, because they think that you must be over the worst. But six months is precisely the time that you need them most. It is the moment when the understanding that you are really alone finally hits home - big style.

You may well feel suicidal, you may well feel helpless in the face of what fate has dealt you, you may want to go out and find a totally unsuitable man, just so that you don't have to be alone anymore. And if you do choose to get laid by a married man because he's a sure thing and he only lives around the corner, then nothing I say will prevent that. What I can say is that at some point around this time you might find yourself reaching the limits of your emotional resources.

You will probably have noticed that your telephone is strangely silent in the evenings, where once it rang all the time. This leaves you with a lot of time to think - and thinking is a dangerous thing for a widow. When you have nothing to distract you, you will start to dwell on all the myriad

implications of your enforced solitude. Soon the silence will stop being refreshing and start becoming oppressive.

You will find that Father's Day lasts for a fortnight, and that everywhere you go there will be ideas for gifts that you still think about but can no longer buy. And just as the world is peopled by babies, for women who are struggling to conceive, so your world is now filled with couples, strolling hand in hand, stopping to kiss and touch each other. You will long to be kissed, you will long to be held, you will long to pick his socks up off the floor and iron his shirts. But all you can do is watch and wish your time away.

But you still need an answer. You will want to find something to help you understand why he died. You will be desperate to know if there was anything that you could have done which might have prolonged his life. You are entitled to see his medical records, and if you ask to see them then your doctor is duty-bound to hand them over to you. And if your husband died in a road accident then you will want to know if there was any way that it could have been prevented.

It is at this time that you might start to feel guilt. It is irrational and damaging to harbour feelings of guilt about the death of your husband, but you will feel it all the same. The guilt may take several forms; you might hate yourself for not giving him a hug before he left for work, not knowing that you would never have the chance to hug him again. You might blame yourself for the fact that he worked so hard and ended up dying of a coronary. You might wish that you'd been with him in hospital when he died, instead of sleeping at home with your children. You will go back in time and wish that certain things had not happened the way they had; you will try desperately to think of ways that could have made a difference to the final outcome.

And when you are tired of searching, when you are tired of wishing, you may think about stopping it all and joining the man you love. You will give in totally to the feeling of hopelessness and you will wish that you were dead. With all your heart you will wish it, but as long as you are a mother, as long as you have friends and family that care about you, something in your head will tell you that you cannot leave - that you have to stay.

You have touched bottom.

You have gone as low as you can go without actually killing yourself, and when you recognise that you have reached the limits of your endurance, only then will you begin your recovery.

There is no blame to be apportioned, no secret formula that would have prolonged your husband's life, but because you have nobody to blame, you will end up blaming yourself. It is hard to be thankful when life seems so hopeless, but if you try and focus on the happiness that you brought your husband, rather than all the things that you didn't do, then you might start to see things differently.

I spent a long time blaming myself for so many things. I tried to piece together all of the important events which helped to shape the outcome of Charlie's life, and then looked at the role that I had played. If only I had made Charlie visit the doctor when he began to feel unwell; if only he hadn't been born with a leaking heart valve; if only he hadn't succumbed to such a virulent virus; if only we had been able to enjoy a few more years together; if only Alice could remember her daddy. If only I had been able to tell him just how much I loved him as he lay dying.

With my last breath I would have done it. With my last breath I would have whispered my love for him. But I couldn't whisper to him, all I could do was shout a God with every ounce of my strength for taking that man from me.

It wasn't fair. Life isn't fair, and nor is death.

You can spend the rest of your life trying to find answers, you can spend the rest of your life wishing things had been different.

But wishing won't bring your husband back.

Nothing will bring him back to you, and the only way you will ever move on is if you can learn to

accept what has happened.

You must stop wishing and start living.

I no longer blame myself. I believe that all things are meant; that some people are destined to die young and that we must be thankful if we have had the chance to love and be loved, for however short a time.

Forgiving myself took time and was only possible once I had plumbed the depths of my grief.

Watching 'Truly, Madly, deeply' and drinking a whole bottle of Rioja certainly help that process, and I recommend it as the precursor to a really good rant at God for being so unfair. Once you have ranted, shouted and screamed at whosoever you feel like shouting at, then you will feel so much better. Just try not to do it in the supermarket, or on the bus, or people might mistake you for some kind of mentalist.

The recovery process is hard, but coming up out of depression is much easier than going down into it. It is a long, slow process, but once you have made the decision to look to the future, you will find it much easier to accept the past.

Birthdays, Weddings and Anniversaries.

The grieving process is a long and difficult journey, and standing out like hurdles on the path to normalcy are all the significant events that you used to celebrate, but which you now want only to forget.

But there is no getting away from them.

There are only so many wedding invitations that you can refuse, only so many card shops that you can avert your eyes from in the week before Father's day, only so much 'Bah, humbug' that you can mutter at Christmas. At some stage you will have to face these obstacles, and sooner or later one of them will bring you crashing to the floor.

Weddings are especially difficult and should be avoided in the first year if at all possible. Family weddings cannot be avoided and so you should try and prepare yourself for what is to come.

Firstly, it will be an occasion of great joy for the happy couple, but you will find it hard to share their joy, however much you love them. You will try, for their sake, to smile for the wedding photographer, but all the while you will be longing to walk away.

Seeing two people setting out on a journey, which for you has just ended, will be extremely difficult. You will be reminded of your own wedding and that memory will fill you with untold sadness - sadness that you will have to disguise, when all about you are happy faces. The sight of so many people celebrating what you have just lost will reduce you to tears, but you will not want to be seen to be crying, just in case your distress spoils the happy day for other people. And so you will be brave, for the sake of your family, you will get through the day as best you can and you will leave feeling empty and alone.

Birthdays are also difficult. You may well wander around the shops, musing on what to buy for your husband's birthday before you realise that he no longer has a birthday. Your own birthday will be even more difficult. If you do not have any children, then it will be a very lonely, empty day. You should try to buy yourself a small treat, just so that you have something nice to open. Your friends and family will be especially aware of how you are feeling, and will almost certainly try to make you feel special in some way, either by taking you out or by giving you a present. In any event, you should try to remember that it is only a day, a day like any other and that by building it up into something important will only cause you pain.

Christmas is unavoidable. Your first Christmas alone will be hellish, and it would be best spent amongst friends or family. But even in the midst of loving family you are likely to feel very uncomfortable. It is all to do with the giving of presents. Sitting and watching couples exchanging gifts will only remind you of all the things that you would like to have bought for your husband. It will remind you of all the lovely things that he bought for you in the past, and of the love that went into choosing them. And if he never bought you anything nice, then you will be thinking of all the useless kitchen gadgets and unfortunate red, lacy knickers that are now all that you have to remind you of his presents, and his presence at Christmas.

If you have children, then Christmas is something that you will have to grin and bear. They will be expecting the same amount of excitement and the same number of presents as usual. You may not be in a position to be able to afford to give them everything that they want, so only buy what you can easily afford and try to remind them that things are different for you now. Anyway, other people are bound to spoil them, so you really shouldn't worry. Being with other people at Christmas will help greatly, and if there are other children to play with then you might be able to grab a few moments of quiet reflection. Otherwise just fix a smile on your face and get through it any way you can. The laughter of children is the best tonic that you can have at this time, so try to make the most of it.

New Year's Eve sucks the big one. I never really liked it when Charlie was alive, but my God, how I hate it now.

It is built up to be this big, happy event when people get together and have a fantastic time, but in reality I think it nearly always ends up as one, great big let-down. There is a false sense of importance attached to it, and you should not attach any importance to it whatsoever. My recipe for a perfect New Year's Eve in the early years of widowhood is a nice meal, followed by a mug of Horlicks and an early night. If you do want to go out, get drunk and then stand alone whilst other couples snog on the stroke of midnight, the go right ahead - but don't say I didn't warn you. You will invariably wake up the next morning with a thumping hangover and a feeling of deep disillusionment - and if that is how you want to greet the New Year then so be it.

The anniversary of your husband's death will undoubtedly be one of the most significant hurdles that you will have to face. It may send you spiralling into depression, but if you are like me, then you will see it a milestone on the road to your recovery. Strangely, I did not feel sad - I felt elated. I knew that I had triumphed on that day, and I honestly believed that I could face anything that fate had to throw at me once it was over. I am not suggesting that you will feel the same way, but I do hope that you will feel a certain sense of achievement at surviving the trials of the previous year. You will probably receive many cards and bouquets of flowers, and it is likely that many will come from people whom you haven't heard from in a while. If you are not feeling depressed or especially sad, then others might think it strange, but others have not been feeling what you have been feeling for the last twelve months. You will have thought of your husband every day to a varying degree, and you will think about him to varying degrees every day for the rest of your life. Other people forget, it is human nature to do so, but they will remember on that particular day and they will want to let you know that they are thinking of you. It is always nice to get flowers, and getting cards from people that you haven't heard from in a while will give you an excuse to get back in touch with them again.

The anniversary might well have an unexpected effect on your child. I thought my daughter Rosie was over the worst of her grief when I took her down to Charlie's grave on the second anniversary of his death, but I was totally unprepared for the reaction that followed. Visiting the grave on that day triggered an extreme reaction, culminating with my five-year-old daughter telling me that she

wanted to die, so that she could be with her daddy again.

It is a heartbreaking thing for any parent to hear their own child expressing the wish to die, but sometimes we all need a shock like that to make us realise what that child is really feeling.

Grief does not have a specific timescale, especially in the case of a child, so you must be prepared for an extreme reaction on a day of particular significance, and you should try to deal with it accordingly.

Weddings, anniversaries and birthdays are not always happy days for you or your children and you must spend them in ways that are going to cause you least distress. In time they will become easier and a great deal more enjoyable, but don't feel that you have to enjoy them just because other people expect you to. Do what you feel is right and always remember that it is only one day out of your life. Cross it off your calendar when it is over and then move on.

Holidays From Hell

Question: What do people do to relax and unwind?

Answer: They go on holiday.

Question: What do widows do get stressed-out and wound-up?

Answer: They go on holiday.

I think it is safe to say that going on holiday alone, or alone with children in the early months of widowhood, is the most desolate and unpleasant experience imaginable. I can remember every second of my first holiday alone with the girls with painful clarity - and I wasn't even alone, I was with Charlie's family. But that didn't matter to me; it was only three months after Charlie's death and it was far too soon. Every single experience on that holiday, which would have at once been pleasurable and evocative, became detestable. Only the happiness of my girls brought me any respite from the black cloud that shadowed every balmy day.

When we first arrived at our French holiday home I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the landscape, and then immediately overwhelmed by the knowledge that Charlie wasn't there to see it with me. I knew he would have loved it; I knew that he would have taken over the kitchen and busied himself, rustling up something delicious for supper, whilst we all sat on the shady terrace with a glass of wine and watched the sun setting over the distant hilltops.

But none of that was going to happen.

I was seeing it alone. I had nobody to share the sights and the smells and the resonance of the place. By day, with Charlie's family and my children, I was alone. At night, whilst a thunderstorm lit up the shuttered darkness like a million flashbulbs, I was alone. I felt I should enjoy the holiday for the sake of my children, but all I wanted to do was get in the car and drive back to where I felt safe and protected.

When at last the holiday was over and I could return home, I vowed that it would be a long time before I ventured abroad again. And of course it was foolish to do that, because getting away from everything that helps you to feel safe and secure, is part of finding out about your strength and your ability to cope with the reality of widowhood.

My advice would be to wait a while before you venture out on holiday. If you can establish some sort of structure at home, then you will find it much easier to cope with the uncertainties of being a single traveller. When you feel ready to face it, getting away by yourself is great - but getting away when you are a widow is not always easy to do. Finding somebody to look after your children for

a week is quite a tall order, but if you have friends or family who are willing to help you, then a week's respite from your responsibilities will do you a power of good.

But where do you go and what do you do?

Well, the Sunday papers are full of adverts for holidays for the single traveller. It is up to you which of these you investigate, but generally speaking, you can be as active or as inactive as you like. Personally speaking, I would rather cover myself in jam and sit on a termite mound than go on a trekking holiday, but many people enjoy that sort of thing. I love scuba diving, because it doesn't involve stout boots or facial hair, but I know that many people find the thought of putting on a mask and going underwater to a depth of 30 metres totally abhorrent. What you choose to do is entirely up to you, as long as you feel safe and happy doing it, and there aren't too many weird people doing it with you.

I have been scuba diving in the Red Sea on a couple of occasions, which was excellent fun and good value for money. You will find lots of single travellers and many fits blokes on a diving holiday - if you are lucky. If, like me, you expect to find a handsome instructor and lots of single men to buddy-up with, then you might be disappointed. On my first trip I found a lady instructor called Freddie Pickles, lots of couples, and when I got in the water, a rather nasty and aggressive Titan Trigger fish, which bit right through my fin and then chased me all the way back to the boat. None of these experiences fitted with the cosy image I had of spending hot, lazy days on a dive boat, being chatted up by handsome strangers - but I did come away from the trip with my P.A.D.I Open Water qualification, and a love of diving. The next year I went again and I had a real blast. I got in with a group of divers who were mostly solo travellers, and we went out together every night and had a really wonderful time. I still had the inevitable awkward question to field, but instead of being tongue-tied, when a diving chum asked if I had left my husband at home, I just looked at him and said,

'Yes - because he died three years ago and that makes it a bit difficult to bring him with me.'

I have learned a lot from going on holiday on my own. It takes a lot of courage, but then if you don't try, you never get to test just how far you have come. I'm not going to try to tell you any of this is easy - it isn't. There have been many times when I wanted to feel happy about where I was, and whom I was with, but all I could feel was,

'Why isn't he here to share it with me?'

It makes you cry with frustration and loneliness, but it does get better in time.

I have travelled a long way, and not just on aeroplanes. I have set myself difficult tasks and watched myself grow with the completion of each one. You might not feel confident enough to contemplate travelling alone, and I would certainly not recommend even thinking about doing so for at least a year after being widowed, but thinking about going away alone is half the battle. Whether you choose to travel alone or in a group of solo travellers, you will be taking the first steps on the road to independence. Nobody wants to be alone; it is depressing and soul-destroying to look at a calendar and see nothingness stretching ahead of you, but if you have something positive to look forward to, and something to work towards, you are less likely to dwell on the negative aspects of your life.

Going away with children is a different thing entirely. Basically, as a rule of thumb, expect all mainstream travel companies to penalise you for being a widow - as if you didn't have enough to deal with. Even the ones that say they have special offers for single parents, make up the extra money on the discount they have been so very generous in giving you, by charging you a single supplement on your room for each day of your stay. They are quite blatant about it, in a sneaky and underhand way- (it's all hidden in the small print, if you know where to look). I found out about the dubious practices of holiday companies when I took Rosie and Alice abroad with Thomson

Holidays last year. When I got to the hotel I discovered that I was paying £300 more than a couple with one child, who were staying in exactly the same type of accommodation for the same amount of time.

How does that work?

My advice is to be very careful when choosing who you book with, and don't expect them to feel sorry for you and offer you a discount just because of your circumstances.

Booking the holiday is only the first problem that you will encounter. The journey, be it by ferry, car, rail or plane, will be stressful and tiring. When you have nobody to share the driving or help you with all the mundane essentials, life becomes extremely difficult. Even a simple task like taking one of your children to the bathroom will become almost impossible.

Where do you leave the luggage trolley? What do you do with your other children? How do three smalls and a mother all fit into one cubicle?

Well, the answer is you learn only through trial and error. I can guarantee that you will find the whole thing a complete nightmare from start to finish, and you will definitely need a holiday at the end of it.

Holidays with your children are like weekends - magnified tenfold. Every widow knows how hateful it is to spend two days trying to entertain the children, whilst all around you are happy fathers, doing happy things with their happy children. I felt angry and lost and alone every weekend for at least two years. I am able to deal with it a lot better now, but holidays bring back all those feelings that I spend so much time trying to suppress. On holiday you have to be around men; men who are making a special effort to be perfect fathers, and that will make you feel very jealous, and will make your children feel the loss of their own father even more acutely.

But you have to bite the bullet eventually. You know your children deserve a break, and it's only for a week or two, and how hard can it be?

Very hard...

If you have booked into a hotel on your own, the days will be spent by the pool or on the beach, which isn't really too difficult to cope with. But there will be one nagging fear, which will pervade your happy holiday state of mind - and that is:

What do I do once the children are in bed?

The answer is that you have to walk into a packed dining room alone, sit down alone, eat alone and leave alone. I have done it, and in terms of memorable dining experiences, it's way up there with eating a bad oyster and being stuck next to a man who told me he was 'in lubricants' and spent his spare time as a small-gauge railway enthusiast.

This summer, for instance, I sat in a dining room at a table for two and ate my supper alone. I felt fine until I noticed the unwelcome attentions of a German woman who was seated at the next table. She stared at me for the entire meal, and for the whole of that meal I was looking out at the sunset, trying my best to ignore her, but willing her to choke on a big, fat olive stone.

It wasn't so hard, but I couldn't have done it a year ago. Everything takes time, and some things take an awful lot of courage; so don't do anything that you don't feel brave enough to take on.

Don't go abroad if you can't face it, or you can't afford it. Do something simple, like taking the children camping. Even if it's just in the back garden, I can assure you that they will see it as a big adventure; they won't care where they are, as long as they have you to share the experience with them.

Give it time, and in time, even your holidays will seem like a walk in the park.

But weekends will always suck.

Portion Control

So you've stopped feeling suicidal, you've stopped wearing the veil, you've started to look really rather attractive for a complete fruitcake. What comes next?

Well, in my case it was around this time that I started to get certain urges. I was full of anger and hurt and frustration. I had to get it out of me and I knew exactly how I would do it. I would have sex. Not in a romantic, Barbara Cartland way, no, I wanted it long, hard and rough - and I wanted it over and over again. And in my sad, deluded fantasy, when my staggeringly proficient lover would just be shutting his eyes for a well-earned rest after hours of sexual excess, I would prod him awake and tell him that I was ready to do it all over again.

Of course I didn't get what I wanted, because I realised that it was only my body joining in with the madness that was going on in my head, but it does bring me rather neatly to the subject of dating.

If you and your husband did not get on particularly well, then you may be ready to start seeing other men quite soon after his death. If you find a man who can make you happy and can make your children happy, then go to it. If you find a man who makes you happy, but who loathes your children then you should try to think of your children's happiness over your own. And if you don't really care if your children are happy or not, just as long as you get laid, then you must be prepared to live with the consequences.

If you are anything like me then you will think you are ready to be with another man after about a year - but I was deluding myself. It took me at least three years to get on top form, both mentally and physically. If I had started a relationship with a man before then, I might not have achieved all of the things I have, and I would not know myself as I do now. The downside is that I have missed out on an awful lot of sex, but I intend to make up for that just as soon as I can find a man fit enough to take me on.

The Perils of E-Mail

I made a lot of mistakes early on. I grew tired of waiting to meet a man, and so I decided to take matters into my own hands. This course of action led me to enter the wild and wacky world of Internet dating. And at this point I would sound a note of caution. If you believe as I did, that cyberspace is peopled not by social misfits, adolescent boys, married men and losers, but by normal, decent human beings, then you are wrong - because I have had e-mails from all of them to prove it. However, if you do wish to spend the rest of your life shackled to a bed in a trailer park on the New Mexican border, whilst Bubba (A.K.A Simon, the man who described himself to you in the chat room as an erudite businessman from Boston), lopes across the dusty ground, pulling behind him the small donkey that is to be your playmate for the entertainment of all his friends - carry on. Enjoy.

I had to find out for myself. I soon realised that chat rooms were not a place to meet a suitable man, but I did have high hopes for the Internet dating agency that I placed an ad in. I had high

hopes until I opened the first e-mail, and then I realised what I had let myself in for. I got messages from men all over the world and I read them with the growing realisation that there are some really strange men out there that I didn't want to meet - ever.

If you need further proof, I will give you a small taster. My first e-mail was from a man who finished his message of hope with the words - 'I greatly enjoy giving women oral pleasure.' And my last was from a 52 year old who told me that he stood 5'6" in his socks and weighed 64 kg without his clobber on - his words, not mine. He went on to say, 'When I LOVE I LOVE DEEP!!' and finished, rather charmingly, I thought, by offering a proposal of marriage and saying that before a firm commitment could exist, 'LOVE MUST cum into the equation.' I'm not sure if his spelling mistake was intentional or not, but I got the message loud and clear.

You, as a widow, should regard yourself as emotionally vulnerable, because that is what you are. And you should proceed with the utmost caution because you are not yet strong enough to suffer any further trauma, be it physical or mental.

I am not saying that you shouldn't try to make yourself happy again, because that is the fervent wish of every woman who has lost a husband in the prime of her life. You should be happy again - we all want to be happy again, but your happiness will be short-lived if you blunder into a relationship with the first man who lies his way into your e-mail affections.

E-mails are extremely dangerous because the written word is much more powerful than the spoken word. People say things in e-mails that they would never have the nerve to say to your face. People promise things on the page that they have no intention of honouring in real life. You might find yourself pouring out all your troubles, all your hopes and desires to a man, who on paper is more loving and caring and honest and sexy than you ever thought a man could be, but who is, in reality, a shallow, manipulative deviant who can't run off with you as he promised, because he is married, has no intentions of leaving his wife and is only stringing you along for his own warped enjoyment.

I am not speaking from experience, I am only trying to give you an example of what you might be letting yourself in for if you give away too much of yourself too soon.

If you can bear to wait until you are strong enough to suffer a serious rejection, then you will at least have a chance of emerging from it unscathed. If you can find a date through conventional means, then at least you can see with your own eyes what you might be letting yourself in for. And if you can find some regard for your own abilities to make a man fall in love with you again, after spending so long feeling totally worthless, then you deserve all the love that a man can give you.

Getting Out There

When at last you feel that you are ready to start being seen in polite society again, there are a few things that it might be useful to know. Firstly, people are going to say things that inadvertently mention the subject of death, and more specifically, they are likely to mention the very means of death employed to remove your husband from this world. For example: if your husband died in a car accident, a male friend employing the phrase, 'This food looks like road kill.' would induce in himself a peculiar combination of facial paralysis and sphinctal tightening. If your husband died of heart failure and a work colleague casually mentions that, 'All this pressure is going to give me a coronary,' then that person might very well forgo the embarrassment of having to look you in the

eye, and choose instead an early exit through a fourth storey window.

You may think I'm exaggerating, but I can assure you that people will say really crass things - and it isn't their fault. You may be a little embarrassed, but you really shouldn't make it too hard for them, because they will already be feeling terrible. Unless you have chosen to wear a black veil, or a matching black armband and pop-sock combination, people are likely to forget momentarily that you are a widow. So try to give them a break - they will thank you for it, believe me.

The only people in the crass remark department who do not deserve a break are divorced women, who feel that they have a right to compare what they have been through with what you are going through. They have no right, because making a comparison between death and divorce is like saying that repeatedly picking a scab on your knee until it bleeds and leaves a scar, is in the same pain league as having your leg torn off at the hip by wild animals and then devoured before your eyes.

Telling your children that they can only see daddy at weekends is hard, but it is not the same as telling them that their daddy is dead.

The closest I have ever come to wanting to hit a woman is when I heard that she had said in a discussion about my situation that, 'Separation is much more painful than bereavement.'

I should have hit her, and then said, 'Feeling pain? Didn't see it coming? You've lost that tooth and it's never coming back - welcome to my world.'

The Social Whirl

By now you must be getting lots of invitations to go out.

No?

Are married couples who used to ask you to dinner or down to the pub, trying to avoid you?

Well, you have to realise what you are now, is a relatively normal, single woman, in the same age group as all your married friends - but with latent, and possibly very powerful, unfulfilled sexual needs. You are a very dangerous guest to casually toss amongst men who have been married for maybe a decade and who are very possibly slightly bored with their own sex lives. You may not see yourself as a threat, unless you really want to ruin the marriage of a trusted friend, but your female friends might see you as a bit of a loose cannon, and prefer to keep you at arm's length. If you do get invited out to meet a selection of eligible, single men then good luck to you, but there is every chance that you will not.

I have mentioned about avoiding formal dinner parties in the early weeks, but you may now feel ready for the odd party. Parties are easy - lots of people, dancing, food.

Wrong.

I would not wish to put you off attending social functions, because you need to get out and have a relaxing, enjoyable time every once in a while. But I must caution you that what you hope a party might be, and what it actually is, can be two completely different things.

If you go to a party on your own, you will either have to use public transport or drive yourself, and driving yourself means that you cannot drink more than a glass of wine all evening. You will get used to this over time, but being sober as opposed to happily drunk, does mean that you will remember any regrettable incidents with painful clarity the next morning.

Arriving at a party as a lone woman has to be experienced to be believed. If your hostess is a good friend then she might well meet you at the door and take you over to some nice people who will talk to you, but if it is a big party then the chances are that you will have to brazen it out alone.

If the other guests are all good friends then it will be a fairly easy job to join a group and get chatting.

Hopefully this will make the start of the evening a painless affair, but even if you do know people at the party, there might still be a chance that someone might not have heard your news, and so will follow the inevitable explanation, followed by condolences and then a long, long silence as people struggle to think of something to say. At best you will change the subject with a witty aside and all will be well, at worst they will find an excuse to walk away, leaving you stranded in the middle of the room - and I'm not making this up, it has happened to me.

If you are amongst strangers, then somebody is bound to ask where your husband is. I can almost guarantee that it will happen at some stage during the evening, so you should be prepared with a stock answer to ease their embarrassment. I sometimes get bored with beating about the bush and come straight out with it - it is sometimes less painful for both parties that way. But as a rule of thumb, if you answer all questions relating to your husband with, 'Actually, I'm a widow.' then you should be able to cope with most eventualities.

If this is your first party as a widow, you might well be struck with an overwhelming feeling of isolation, because even if people have been keeping you company for a while, it is likely that they will drift away from you at some stage during the evening, leaving you on your own.

Looking around a room full of unfamiliar faces and wondering what to do next will induce a combination of nausea and mild panic, because there is nothing like a crowded room for making you feel totally alone. You have been cast adrift without the familiar life raft that was your partner; you may not have talked to him much during parties that you went to together, but you always knew he was there. He was there to rescue you from boring conversations, he was there to listen when you wanted to whisper some salacious gossip, and he was there to take you home when you had had enough. Having him there gave you confidence, a reference point - an anchor.

Not having him there will make you feel like drowning yourself in the punch bowl.

Parties are not just difficult - they are fraught with danger.

Consider a Christmas party that I was invited to a few years ago.

The evening started pleasantly enough, I was given a lift by a friend, which meant that I could drink. There were lots of people that I knew in attendance; I could socialise, eat nice food and dance the night away. It had all the makings of a great evening. And indeed it was a great evening until the disco started and I was asked to dance by an old friend. I had spent a while chatting to him beforehand, he had asked me how I was doing and I asked about his new baby, so it seemed entirely natural that we should dance together.

After the first record finished I turned to leave, but he asked if I wanted another dance. It seemed churlish to refuse and so we continued dancing, two feet apart and smiling at each other occasionally. And then all of a sudden I was being shoved sideways off the dance floor by his wife, who made sure that I was well clear before flinging her arms around his neck and rubbing herself up against him like some Bonobo chimpanzee.

I wasn't sure whether to cry or throw myself into the speaker stack. I felt completely crushed and I wanted to leave - but I couldn't because I didn't have a lift home. And then I found that I couldn't get a taxi either, so I had to stay at the party and act like nothing had happened.

I had to try to hold my head up and act like I didn't care that I had been utterly humiliated. I had to share the same room with a woman who was looking at me like she'd triumphed over me in some way, like she'd won back the man that I'd been trying to steal away.

I don't go after married men - she knew that.

Eventually I was offered a lift home by someone who turned out to be less than sober, and all I could think on the way home was,

'This is it, I've just been humiliated by an inebriated trollop and now all my friends think I'm after

her husband. And why would I want to go after a man who considers the height of sartorial elegance to be a purple crushed velvet suit? Why would I? And now I'm going to die in a Nissan Micra and it's Christmas and my children will be orphans.'

But I did get home eventually and my children did enjoy Christmas.

But I didn't forgive that woman.

And the moral of this story is - expect the unexpected. Don't rely on lifts - always try to drive yourself, just in case something does go wrong and you need to get home in a hurry. Do watch out for jealous wives, especially if they have been drinking. And if somebody hurts you, don't let them see they've hurt you.

Revenge is a dish best eaten cold. It took me two years of waiting, but I got mine eventually.

D.I.Y

If I were to give you one piece of practical advice to help you to cope with the everyday realities of being widowed, it would be this: Get yourself a tool kit.

If your husband had a tool kit then dig it out and familiarise yourself with its contents; if he was totally impractical then you will have to get yourself some tools of your own. Television is saturated with D.I.Y programmes that make it all look so easy, but the fact is that hanging a door or tiling a floor, are jobs that take quite a lot of skill. I am not suggesting that you attempt to do anything complicated yourself, but there are some basic tasks like wiring a plug or hanging shelves that you can do yourself, thus saving the expense of calling in a carpenter or an electrician.

There is no need to go mad; you don't need anything fancy like a router or a circular saw, just a few basic essentials. The best thing to do first of all is to visit your local D.I.Y superstore and have a walk around. You can ask for advice and if you explain your situation then I'm sure the staff will fall over themselves to help you. You don't have to spend a fortune, most of the tools can be bought second-hand if need be, but the basic tool kit I would recommend is as follows:

- A. A claw hammer
- B. A pair of pliers (pointy)
- C. A pair of pliers (blunt)
- D. A Stanley knife
- E. A set of screwdrivers
- F. An insulated electrical screwdriver
- G. A saw
- H. A pair of wire cutters
- I. A set of spanners.
- J. An electric drill - preferably a hammer drill
- K. A spirit level

I would suggest that along with your tool kit you also invest in a basic D.I.Y. manual. But if you only want to wire a plug, then most D.I.Y stores have free leaflets, which explain how to do simple jobs around the house. Basic wiring is no more complicated than knitting, but people get scared when they think about electricity (I get scared when I think about knitting and I find wiring really easy, but then I never said I was normal). Anyway, if you are a complete novice, then start with a

plug and see how you get on.

Before I get lots of letters from horrified safety officials, I must stress that I am not advocating that you gaily set about re-wiring your house armed only with a screwdriver and a vague notion about the brown wire being live and the stripy one being earth. Electricity can kill, and so you must only attempt what you know you can do safely, but putting up a light fitting isn't rocket science, it just takes a bit of common sense, and with time, patience and application you will be amazed at what you can achieve. Knowledge is power. You can change a light fitting, you can mend a broken tap and you can assemble flat-pack furniture.

There are many unscrupulous tradesmen out there who will shake their heads and tut-tut when asked to do the simplest of jobs, because they know you are ignorant and they know they can take advantage of you. If you can get a friend or neighbour who is competent at D.I.Y. to show you how to do some simple jobs around the house, then you will gain some level of independence. And even if you don't want to attempt any home maintenance, it is always useful to know how to find the trip switch, the fuse box and how to turn of the water stop-cock in an emergency.

You might think that you have too much to do without having to worry about home maintenance, but there is a very good reason for getting acquainted with your tool kit. If you can master something which you first thought was impossible then you will gain self-esteem, and self-esteem is something that is vital to your recovery.

If you get stuck then you can find all the information you need at:www.finddiy.co.uk/. This site provides you with information about every D.I.Y. site in the U.K.

Other useful sites are:www.diy.com/ and www.homebase.co.uk/

N.B. As with anything regarding safety in the home, if you are at all unsure about what you are doing, then it is wise to call in an expert.

D.I.Y - The Other Sort

It is impossible to talk about the trials and tribulations of being a young widow without touching upon the rather delicate matter of sexual release. The simple fact of it is that women reach their sexual peak in their mid- thirties, which by some perverse twist of fate is exactly the time that many of us are widowed.

In an ideal world we would be able to go out and find a new partner, but being widowed in your thirties presents you with something of a problem. You are now too old to know many single men and too young to know many divorcees. That leaves married men, and I think they should be left well alone.

If you are lucky enough to meet a man when you have regained your sanity and your self-confidence, then that is fantastic. You will probably have the best sex you have ever had, buy a lovely house together and live happily ever after.

If not, if you cannot find a suitable partner, then you will be presented with something of a dilemma. You will have thrown away all your old knickers and invested in lovely new underwear, with the expectation that you will find a man to appreciate it - and what?

Nothing, that's what.

All you have is a drawer full of pants and an empty diary, so what do you do now?

Well, let's approach this methodically. You are a normal, healthy woman with a woman's needs.

You have the following options:

- A. Hire a male escort
- B. Join a dating agency and hope that you meet a nice man before you become bankrupt.
- C. Answer a lonely-hearts advert in your local paper.
- D. Pick somebody up in a bar.
- E. Buy a device that will alleviate your sexual frustration.

I think a woman has to be pretty desperate to hire a male escort. Firstly, they are extremely expensive. Secondly, have you seen the type of man who works as an escort? Thirdly, if you did sleep with an escort, imagine how desperate, lonely, and possibly very itchy you would feel when he left you the next morning.

Dating agencies have potential, but they can be really expensive.

Lonely- hearts adverts in local papers are certainly an option; they are cheap, easy and undemanding. You might meet prince charming, but you might just as easily meet his ugly brother.

Picking somebody up in the bar has an element of danger that some may find exciting, so does wrestling a pit-bull, but I wouldn't recommend either to a vulnerable widow.

And last but not least - that thing; that device; that unmentionable horror - the power tool.

Vibrator.

There, I've said it.

You know you shouldn't have to resort to such measures, after all you were attractive-enough to find a perfectly nice husband. So what are you now? Desperate, that's what.

Other than sitting on your washing machine during a spin cycle or finding an enthusiastic and willing, licky Labrador, there are not many other ways of finding sexual release for a woman in your position.

Vibrator

There, I've said it again.

Purchasing such a device is never easy, and I can't think of anything worse for a widow than walking into a sex shop full of sad men and giggling girls, shopping for their hen-night. You could try an Ann Summers party, but by far the easiest and most discreet way of finding what you are looking for is to buy over the Internet.

Now, to save you the effort of trawling through zillions of porno/sex shop web sites, I have consulted my friends and a popular choice seems to be: www.taboo.co.uk/

They seem to have a huge range, and your order comes discreetly wrapped so your postman will be none the wiser.

I'm not going to say any more on this subject because I feel that a woman's ladyparts are her own private kingdom, but I do hope that you will find something to put a smile on your face - preferably something that doesn't have an economy wash or a waggy tail - but hey, if it makes you happy then who cares...

They Can't Touch You For It...

I have received many e-mails since the launch of merrywidow on the subject of the madness. Madness afflicts all grieving people at one time or another; it is nothing to be ashamed of, it is perfectly normal, but at the same time it is not something that one can easily explain to anybody who hasn't actually experienced it. Here, as an example, is an extract from my book 'The Big-Hearted Man'.

Bookshops are full of self-help books, there are so many titles to choose from - the list is endless, but I can't be doing with any of them. 'The Little book of Calm', what's that all about? 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus'. I can précis that whole book in one line - Women and Men are different and therein lies the attraction. The shelves are stuffed with such books and they all tell you what you already knew but didn't have the conviction to believe.

I didn't need a book to tell me I was mad - it was clear to everybody around me. I walked around all day long with mad staring eyes, with a 'slap me' face; with 'shake me' shoulders, with 'kick me' shins. I walked around all day just waiting for a nice doctor to run up to me, calling for the restraints and the sleepy drug.

But I was never restrained and I couldn't sleep.

I wanted to be mad, I needed to be mad, God knows I had every reason to be mad - bonkers, barking, loopy loo, stark staring mad.

It's all part of getting better.

You have to let the madness out, the anger out, the hurt out - otherwise it turns inwards and screws you up for the rest of your life.

Madness can manifest itself in a variety of different ways. I have already written about my desire to find a big brute of a man and use him sexually up to the point that he was rendered incapable of decent walking. I also wanted to physically harm a number of individuals who had upset people close to me - and my defence would have always been the same,

'You can't touch me for it - I'm a widow.'

I felt at various times the need to kill myself or leave the house and my children and never return. But always there was a sense of responsibility, which prevented me from doing anything truly wild or reckless. When I look back on how I behaved I think that my friends showed a considerable amount of patience with me, and the amazing thing was that they never made me feel like a freak because of the way I was acting. I mean, no girl in her right mind completes the 'Describe your best physical attribute' section in an application form from a respectable dating agency, with the words,

'I've got a bum like a peach, only not as furry.'

Do they ?

No, they don't - but I did.

Rebecca Chapman lost her husband in very similar circumstances to my own and she wrote this:

I had a hugely POWERFUL desire to shave all my hair off! I know it's a tradition in India with widows, but never understood why. For me it was because I felt so altered inside and yet looked perfectly normal on the

outside that I almost needed to make a physical statement by changing my appearance dramatically. I fought back the desire and didn't do it. I figured it would freak my kids too much, but then again they might have understood in their own way.

.....I actually told my GP that I wanted to burn my house down because I was so fed up with everything (this was in the early days)- I just wanted to absolve myself of any form of responsibility whatsoever.

She nodded sagely, and I don't think she wrote it in my notes!

Rebecca is not alone in her rather individualistic approach to dealing with her grief and I would love to hear some more stories of how people have been afflicted by mourning madness, so please write to me at merrywidow@boydells.com and I'll put your stories on the site .

Reasons To Be Cheerful

I was once told that if I could survive the first year of widowhood, then I could survive anything. There were times when I didn't think that I would survive, and I imagine that most young widows have felt the same at one time or another. But we do survive, and when we look back on our experiences, what have we learned? Well, I think all people who have suffered a catastrophic loss are subsequently gifted with the kind of human insight that most psychiatrists would happily sell their couch for.

You are able to see what really matters in life. You are able to see people for what they really are. You are able to help others with their problems. People will seek your advice; they will look to you as somebody with experience beyond your years. And you will give them your help, because benevolence is something that comes out of loss.

People who only saw you as an extension of your husband will now see you as a person in your own right. You will have learned to manage your finances, run your household and cope with bringing up your children on your own. You will have learned the true value of friendship, and you will know that the friends that have come with you this far will stay with you for the rest of your life. You will be imbued with great self-belief and stoicism, and you will see other people's petty problems for what they are - inconsequential.

If all that is not enough to make you happy then consider this: if you have not already met a man, then just imagine what it will be like when you do. You will have all of the intense joy of a first date, the sexual frisson of a first kiss, the weirdness of looking at a new naked man, when you thought that you would be sleeping with your husband for the rest of your life. You will learn new tricks, have fun, and be happy. You have all that to come.

You can talk about your late husband, not with the bitterness of a divorcee, but with affection. And then you can live happily ever after.

So go to it.

Be happy.

Nobody deserves it more than you.

