

THE LIFE OF DEATH SHOW is the story of a deceased father who communicates messages from dead spirits to his popular news anchor daughter who then delivers these messages on "The Life Of Death" TV show. The show subverts the finality of death.

The Life Of Death Show

By Mary Torre Kelly

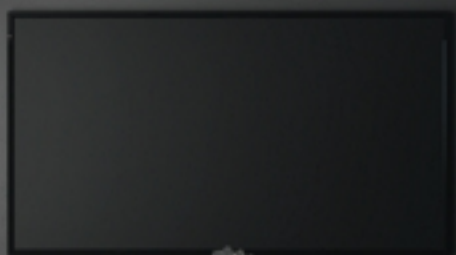
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The Life Of Death Show

A Speculative Novel



A Liberal Dusting of the Supernatural

Mary Torre Kelly

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There are no unnatural or supernatural phenomena,
only very large gaps in our knowledge of what is
natural. We should strive to fill those gaps of
ignorance.

– Edgar Mitchell –
Apollo 14 Astronaut

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts...They lie unquestioned,
uncombined.

Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric...

– Edna St. Vincent Millay-
(d. 1950)

It is wonderful that tens of thousands of years
have elapsed since the creation of the
World, and still it is undecided whether
or not there has ever been an instance
of the spirit of any person appearing
after death. All argument is against it,
but all belief is for it.

– Samuel Johnson-
(1709-84)

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PART ONE

1

Near Life

April 1, SOMETIME IN THE RECENT FUTURE

On his death-day, Henry Lee Hassett missed his chance to slip the earth and instead found himself in an Atlanta TV studio watching his daughter Jessie, a network news anchor, deliver the evening news, live. He was mystified as to how this could happen and why? It was a shock to die, an outrage. So, in the absence of any absolute law forbidding consciousness after death, Henry discovered a continuing stream of probability, and he rode that lawless wave. Like the sporting golfer he was, he played through. He figured the odds of this happening were even greater than the odds of making a hole-in-one, calculated to be about 8,606 to 1, on a par 3. Still, someone made a heart-stopping hole-in-one somewhere in the world every single day.

His transition had been abrupt. One minute he was lying in bed looking out at Silver Lake, taking his last nickering of breath, and the next minute he was hovering in a television studio four hundred miles away watching Jessie deliver bad news. How was this possible? Wasn't his brain supposed to stop functioning when he died? He'd always thought religion was a caution, so he figured he hadn't been chosen. Was this God's denial? Or the effect of his own avid wish to stay alive for another round of golf? Or was it some cosmic mistake designed to tip the imagination off to what had been passing

for a given but was really just foolish consistency? He liked that one.

Henry found that his “I” was gone. As though he’d meshed with something bigger, something other. He’d still have to use the personal pronoun, but it wasn’t the same as when he was alive. He stood outside his self now, bodiless, a virtual narrator of what he could see and hear. He had only those two senses, and thought, if you can call that a sense. The last sensation he remembered feeling was froideur: a cold that burned. Now he could no longer feel, taste, or smell anything. *Well, two out of five ain’t bad.* He still had his emotions, his hearts core, and a curious mind, like another sense. So, Carl Jung and Willie Nelson, and a bunch of other guys were right about the psyche: it isn’t confined to space and time. It doesn’t die. You can’t kill energy. It’s all borrowed, and you might even get a chance to give it back.

Now Henry could see from an out-of-body distance, who he had been when he was alive, how his lifelong desire to be someone and fit in had ruled him and hindered him. Although he’d been a builder for a living, he’d always been a dreamer too. And a slow, plodding reader. Yet he had learned all he knew from books, and there were huge gaps in his knowledge. But, by amalgamating oddments of literature with science and how-to manuals, he’d become myriad-minded. He had read both with purpose, and aimlessly, always hoping to stumble upon nuggets of wisdom, those important things all but the never knowing knew. Scientific American and Popular Science were his favorite magazines. He remembered reading a quote from Carl Sagan: “Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.” Could this thing happening to him that no one will believe be it?

Quantum Physics led him to understand that everything changed form: subatomic particles swirled in space and could

not be measured or fixed in either space or time. Come to think of it, no one had ever proven these particles didn't have thought. He'd loved his family, music, art, literature, good groceries, the natural world, electronics, radios, and the great game of golf. Oh, he'd loved life! But now he saw that he had only been an ordinary man. He was no rainmaker. And he saw how strange being ordinary really was, in the larger cosmic scheme. *I'm not even sure the world will say I have been here.*

Henry suspended his head trip to focus on the blazing television studio which looked like a mixture of heaven and hell if there were such places. Maybe he would find out. Bright broadcasting lights shone and flashed, turning the very air of the room red. The place reeked of reality, of the confusion caused by infomania, caused by television. Faint music that sounded like dying cicadas pulsed in the background, as his daughter delivered bad awful news: violent murders, car accidents, home invasions of the elderly, toxic political corruptions. Why do we default to the worst news? Why did he think Jessie could make an art out of news casting? It was because of him she was here. He had influenced her to choose what he now saw was a torturous job. *Oh, why did I do that? It's unforgivable.*

Maybe it was because he'd enjoyed watching her for half his lifetime, thirty-six years since the day she was born, and he thought everyone else would too. She had that black Irish freshness, pale skin and dark shiny seal hair, the tenderest blue eyes. Her look was unguarded and natural, in contrast to her gravitas. And her voice was exuberant, full of those feathery poly-tones females nurture babies with. He'd always told her she was telegenic, just made for TV. But now as he watched her he was appalled by how all this terrible news dark-shadowed her world, and everyone else's, how snidely

the background orchestral score he'd never even noticed before rose, full of treble, snare drums, a trumpet even. It was treacherous music, mockingly urgent. He looked around at the joyless faces of the crew and the producer, Eli's face, and wondered why they were so numb to it, and why it had never bothered him either, when he was alive. *No, there is no way she can be happy talking this trash. I have to find a way to save her.*

Henry thought about his younger daughter Kate and his two sons. Kate was her mama's girl. His sons had grown up to be patronizing, and distant, always fighting him, especially his eldest son, an actor, who had even changed his name. He loved them all, but he couldn't talk to any of his children, not even his wife, the way he could talk to Jessie Lee. He'd always had the strongest bond with her, and he wondered if they might somehow still connect. If this wave held.

Oh boy, everything's impossible, till it ain't.

He watched Jessie at the news desk wrapping the show and thought she looked tired. The last bit of news always had to be a tad upbeat, along with the music, he remembered that.

Above her head a glitzy sign pandered to the sweep's ratings:

MAKE GROUND WITNESS NEWS
YOUR NUMBER ONE CHOICE

Jessie smiled and brought it:

"And finally. Today a 65-year-old German woman gave birth to quadruplets. She is expected to make the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest mother of quads. I'm Jessie Pettengill. Thanks for choosing Ground Witness News."

She froze in the obligatory smile until Eli called, "We're clear."

Abruptly, a production assistant was up in Jessie's face, handing her a cell phone: "It's your brother Tom, in Florida," iron in the PA's voice.

Jessie shivered. She didn't usually take a call on set, especially not one from Tommy.

Seaborn Pettengill, Jessie's husband and her camera operator, zoomed in, and just then, the producer Eli waylaid Seaborn, complaining about Jessie:

"You gotta talk to her, she has to put out more charm, we're sinking in the ratings.

Not right now." Seaborn snapped, as his camera captured Jessie paling as she listened on the phone. Real life burst upon all the studio monitors.

The curious crew watched the monitors.

Eli went on complaining to Seaborn: "We gotta talk about this—we've dropped to third in the ratings—that's so poor, so poor..."

Jessie clamped her free hand over her ear, and gasped, "What Tom? I didn't hear you," wishing she hadn't heard. What he said was unacceptable. She wanted him to say he was only kidding, April Fools.

Tom raised his voice and repeated himself, a stutter from childhood resurfacing: "He d-d died, a little after s-s-six...a h-h-heart attack..."

Jessie let out a cry that pierced the din of the studio like shot. The crew all turned away from the monitors to look at her live. Her sapphire eyes flooded, consumed the light and turned milky blue. As she listened to Tom, she swayed dizzily, a coldness seeped into her veins.

"Hey, she okay?" Eli nudged Seaborn.

Henry glimpsed Jessie's knees knocking like she had a case of the yips. He leapt forward, but the light shone right through what he was now. It was impossible to be forceful if

you were invisible. He tasted Jessie's salty tears in his mind. He called out to her *I'm here! I'm still here!* but she couldn't hear him. He had no way of getting through to her. He had no way to cause anything to happen. He was just a ghost, neither here nor there.

Seaborn shut down his camera. The monitors went blank. Fresnel's reflected the Titian highlights in Jessie's hair, like a tiny fervent promise, the instant before they all clicked out. He ran to her, winding his black ball cap with white letters that said "Mr. Pettengill" on it, back around to the front of his pony-tailed head.

Jessie gazed at Seaborn, purest grief ruining her face. In one motion, she dropped the phone, her hands raked the air, her legs splayed apart. Seaborn swooped in and caught her before she hit the floor. He knelt holding her, his lips pressed to her forehead. "It's Daddy," she sobbed. She closed her eyes and thought she felt him there.

But Henry was dwindling, leaving the bad news factory behind. He took a long last look at Jessie and realized he might not always be there by her, seeing her as he did in this instant. Maybe it was just a fluke of something like luck, and he was sorely disappointed. If only he had a way to get through to her.

Now, whilst fading, he became otherwise engaged—hard to say how or where—it might be a form of sleep. If it was, he was sleeping on the very parapet of consciousness, and over dreaming. He remembered reading in Harvey Penick's Little Red Book: "The golfing area of the brain is a fragile thing terribly susceptible to suggestion."

If only, if only, if only, he chanted like a mantra, to hold back the pang of loss creeping over him. Who said don't be afraid, you won't miss yourself when you die? It's another lie.

The Life Of Death Show

In a flash, Henry saw his life and even his death had all been leading up to this little fable, this lore after death. But the wave wasn't holding—he was sinking fast—desperately he crooned, though no one could hear him: *Babble for her Mr. Brook... Kiss her for me Mr. Raindrop...And keep her under your roof... Please Mr. Sun...*

Henry loved songs.

2

The New Morning

About a hundred billion people have died since humans first walked the earth, and the removal of the dead has taken multifarious forms. The little drama that would be Henry's funeral began the day after his death-day. From early morning his family had been gathering, consoling, hashing out the details. Tom and his teenaged son Frank were already at the house on Silver Lake with the newly widowed Doris. They had come up from south Florida the night before. The youngest daughter, Kate, had arrived shortly after Henry passed. Henry's eldest son, Chuck-Pete Monroe—a stage name, although everyone in the family had gotten used to calling him that—was flying in from New York City, where he was a well-known actor.

Seaborn was driving Jessie the four hundred miles from Atlanta to Silver Lake in the middle of Florida where Jessie's parents lived. Down through Georgia on I-75 they tooted in Seaborn's blue Land Rover, passing stands of soughing pine trees, inter-sprinkled with blooming pink and white dogwood, and miles of plowed fields, the red clay underbelly of the Piedmont region of Georgia. Alongside the road and in the median wildflowers whirled in the wind of passing traffic. Jessie took it all in but could not reconcile this beauty with the fact of her father's death. Near Valdosta they began seeing groves of pecan trees and graphic signs for "Pecan Logs," tempting them to stop, but they didn't. Only twenty-five more miles till they crossed the state line into Florida. It would all go faster then, like a downhill course.

Jessie was grateful for Seaborn, for driving and for being willing to go through it all with her. His steadfast sense of duty was a side of him she hadn't fully appreciated until now. She lay crumpled on the seat, her woozy head resting on Seaborn's warm thigh as he drove. She was only slightly under the sedative Eli told Dr. Desmond, the station doctor, to give her. It should have knocked her out but did not. She had hardly slept at all. Her heart pined, her mind raced. She felt her father's presence glittering all around her. She shivered and turned the air-conditioning down.

Seaborn squinted when he passed the "Welcome to Florida The Sunshine State" sign, took his sunglasses off the visor and put them on. Ever-ready Seaborn, Jessie thought, watching him. Afterall, they were secure, alive—yet grief laid a pall over them—Jessie thought she could see it as well as feel it. A rain shower began and Seaborn turned the wipers on, smearing white bird shit across the tinted windshield like snow.

The light changed, began to gleam brighter, even thru the shimmering rain. Jessie fluttered her eyes, so the yellowy pink sunlight played on her eyelids. She took balm from the light, letting herself be comforted by the warmth of the April day, the way she had done when she was a child, when everything came to her through her senses. She tried to take belief in the same way, but hard as she tried, she could not believe her father was dead. There had always been a sort of current between them, and she hadn't felt any disconnect. She begged to have him back, *please God*. She couldn't surrender him to darkness. She just wouldn't. She closed her eyes, stubbornly clenching that thought.

But another withering thought entered her mind to torment her: she was at the clock-ticking age, and the scene in her OB-Gyn's office from a couple of days earlier played over

and over in her mind. As she sat on the cold, paper-covered exam table, the doctor had said: "There probably isn't any physical reason, but we'll run some tests. Sometimes women in power careers like yours have trouble conceiving. You've delayed." Such a dire word. In fact, she hadn't *delayed* at all—in four and a half years of passionate sex, they'd never used any birth control at all, yet no baby. She had even quit smoking and it had been so hard to do. She still craved a ciggie. But the doctor said cigarettes killed eggs. They longed for a baby. But all that doctor could offer was: "You will just have to slow down." And now she despaired all the more because it was too late for a kid of theirs to ever know Henry, no matter how much she slowed down. Eli was going to fire her anyway if she didn't perk up. Another worry.

A tune on the radio interrupted her torment. It sounded like the key of C harmonica Henry played—he called it the happiest key—*dada da da, da da da da, dada da da da da da*; over and over again it played, lulling her, a tune she was familiar with but had never really paid much attention to until now. She hummed along. Seaborn looked down and stroked her hair. She couldn't remember the name of the tune, or the words, and this crummy unremembering bugged her. She reached over to shut the radio off so she could think a minute. But it already was off!

Her eyes grew wide. Where was this music coming from? She wondered if Seaborn could hear it. She stared at the wet sky, at the bluesy-white Bible story clouds. Clouds had such abundance, the power to disappear, reappear, and even to signify. How generous they were. Now they were delivering a peaceful feeling—but what was delivering this music?

The car phone sounded, and she picked it up. There was no one on the line. But when she hung up, her hearing felt

different, changed. The tune grew louder. She shook her head and drummed her ears.

"Who was that?" Seaborn asked, his voice underwater, and she heard her own voice say "nobody" before she sank into a new tunnel of sound, with an echo, with a round resonance that made wavy light. The light made loud roiling sound waves, so scary dangerous her ears burned. She swallowed hard, coughed; her ears pop-popped, like hot oil was inside them. She was afraid to listen now, afraid even to breathe. It was hard to stay in the car.

The rain quit, or they had driven out from under it. A red sun blazed. Jessie tried to ease her panicky feelings by watching tiny drops of rainwater, like invested points of light, skitter up the windshield glass. She marveled at how into minutiae she was, how time seemed to have slowed.

Abruptly, the tune ended; she became alert then, on edge. She popped open the glove compartment and retrieved an old stale pack of Parliaments. What she needed for comfort was nicotine.

She plugged in the lighter and lit a cigarette without sitting up. Dimly at first, then clearly, she heard Henry's voice: *I thought you quit smoking?* She looked at the cigarette, then up at the sky. His voice got louder: *Yay you can hear me! It's okay. Don't be afraid. I want you to quit smoking for real, okay? It took days off my life, and when I got right down to it days counted, didn't they?* He laughed a nervous laugh, and she heard giggling too; it seemed to come from out in the universe, like children were laughing with him. She shivered. Goose bumps rose on the back of her neck and shot down her arms.

Seaborn ran his hand idly along her arm, and grazing the bumps, he rubbed vigorously.

Jessie sat up and looked at him. She could tell by his face he hadn't heard a thing. He was in his own world, driving and thinking his own thoughts. She felt groggy, dizzy. She stubbed out the cigarette.

She heard: *You have to give up the pleasure of smoking to save your own life, Jessie Lee. You'll do other things with your handles.* Jessie looked at her hands. Her father was the only person she knew who called hands "handles," and the only person who ever called her Jessie Lee. This can't be happening. *You'll mellow out, slow down to an easier pace...* The clouds were moving, and parting with each of his words. He had a rich, friendly voice, like Jack Lemmon's. She'd always thought this when he was alive too. But, oh God, what was he now?

Henry said: *Now watch this.* He made loop-d-loops with the billowy clouds and laughed wildly. *Cheer up, it's wonderful out here. Don't be sad. I'm finally free, no worn-out old body to bother with anymore, and no ego either. This light is like fresh love; that sunlight down there is only the shadow of this light. I think this is the place cats go Jess—I can hear purring.* She saw movement, like a surfer going over waves, making frothy loop-d-loops, then a vague cloudy likeness of Henry's face laughing as he sang in parody: *Don't cry for me, Argentina...*

She couldn't help smiling at that old corny song. At the same time, she began to sweat and tremble. Her mind shifted and drifted, until she had a maximum lack of control over reality while still awake. Seaborn looked over at her, dolorously, but he smiled back when he saw her smile, picked up her hand, kissed it and held it. Oh, he had no idea.

Gradually, a new picture appeared in the clouds, of a young boy in knickers sitting on a stoop holding a golf club, with his dog, a black Lurcher, settled beside him. Jessie

recognized the picture from a family photo on the mantle at Silver Lake. It was Henry on the day that he'd gotten his first job as a caddy. He'd told her it was the best day of his life. She nudged Seaborn, pointing up at the cloud picture.

Seaborn tilted his head to look up, and nodded, not recognizing Henry, but able to see the foggy image of a boy and a dog formed out of clouds. "Well, I'll be damned," he said, looking at Jessie like she had something to do with it.

Ah, Jessie Lee, I don't know exactly how I'm getting through to you. It's sorta like magic. There must be a scientific explanation though. Maybe I merged with a frequency wave of some kind, latched on to radio waves. Quarks maybe—particles that interact through gravity, electromagnetism. I don't know, and I don't know how long I can stay either. I can sense a tug, pulling me up into the up where it's glorious. Remember to quit smoking if you don't hear from me again—it's a terrible hazard to your health.

"No, don't go!" Jessie cried.

Seaborn thought she meant the picture in the clouds, eroding now. He patted her leg.

For a long while they drove along in silence, but for Jessie it was a silence full of phantoms. She cast about in her mind, desperate for a way out of this overactive grief. Was she drifting into madness? She hoped it was all a dream, but she was awake. She'd once done an interview with Annie Druyan, Carl Sagan's wife. After he died, Annie finished the book she and Carl were writing together. Annie had told her: "When you love someone and are so close to him, when he dies you can still hear his voice inside your head." Jessie took deep breaths and told herself this was all it was. Or else EVP's, electronic voice phenomena—people lately were interested in listening for that. Or something incredible. Or

something telephonic. She would swear that phone call had altered her hearing.

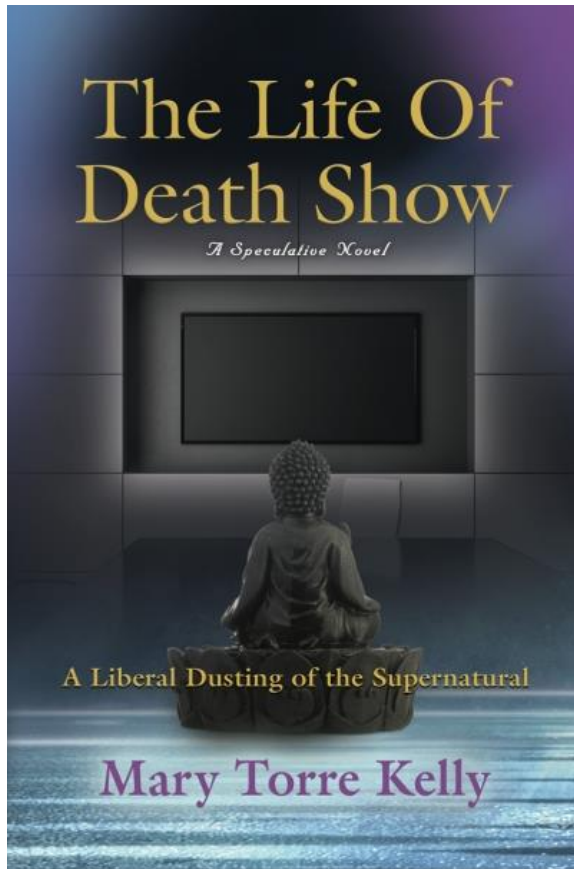
It was quiet now and Jessie slumped against the window and dozed.

After a while Seaborn switched on the radio and dialed up The Reverend Travis Thackston's Christian Crusade. He liked to listen to the cant and swagger of suck-back preachers when he drove, his idea of comedy.

The Reverend was sermonizing: "...because it says in the Bible, Mark 16: those that believe shall take up SERPENTS-AH, and the spirit of the LORD-AH will move in you. Wunst you FEEL it, you never forget it-ah..."

Seaborn grinned. "He's a born showman, you ever see him when he's in the studio, taping his T.V. show?" When Jessie didn't answer he said, "That's good, because his face is better on radio." He looked over at Jessie, expecting at least a smile, but got no reaction at all.

She was hearing from Henry again. He had cut into The Reverend Thackston's show like a commercial: *I'm back! You're gonna have lots of dangerous enemies Jessie Lee. I'm not kidding about that. So, watch out for the hazards.* He took a lob shot in the clouds and Jessie saw a golf ball sail way across the sky, hang for what seemed an eternity, and then vanish.



THE LIFE OF DEATH SHOW is the story of a deceased father who communicates messages from dead spirits to his popular news anchor daughter who then delivers these messages on "The Life Of Death" TV show. The show subverts the finality of death.

The Life Of Death Show

By Mary Torre Kelly

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