

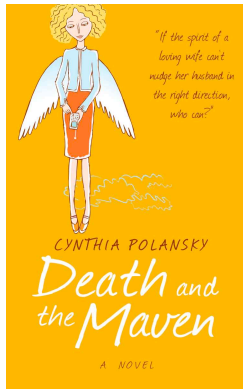


*"If the spirit of a
loving wife can't
nudge her husband in
the right direction,
who can?"*

CYNTHIA POLANSKY

Death and the Maven

A NOVEL



So thinks thirty-something Judith McBride, a Jewish control freak with an unlikely last name. When Judith dies in a medical mishap, she calls on her supernatural status to "rescue" her widowed husband from the sexy clutches of their gold-digging, thrill-seeking blonde accountant. But interfering with earthly events is strictly verboten and the repercussions ripple outward, deeply affecting not only Judith but the lives of her husband and best friend.

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DEATH AND THE MAVEN

by

Cynthia Polansky

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nudge her husband in the right direction, who can?*

CHAPTER 1

I died on a Tuesday when I was 31 years old. In November, my least favorite month in my least favorite season. Barenaked trees, bleak skies, and twilight falling before the end of *Dr. Phil*. Altogether a depressing time.

Nothing good ever happened to me in autumn. It was September when I got food poisoning at my aunt's annual Labor Day picnic and spent the remainder of the weekend on my knees before the porcelain god. It was October when I got so frightened by a plastic skeleton dangling over a door at the second-grade's haunted house that I started to cry and all the kids laughed and pointed. And it was November when I chose to shuffle off my mortal coil. *I, Judith Ratner McBride, being of sound mind and body ...* make that *being of sound mind ...* let's just say I died and leave it at that.

I was nobody extraordinary. Just a nice Jewish physical therapist, happily married to a nice Jewish professional man with an unlikely Irish surname who didn't mind that my thighs were chunky and my yellow-brown hair was frizzy. I never won raffles nor was the tenth caller with the correct answer to the radio station's trivia

question. So who would have thought my end would come like this?

I know what you must be thinking, but I didn't commit suicide. Yet I did choose to die on that day, in that month, that year. It was all part of a plan hatched a lifetime ago ... but I'll get into all that later.

Somehow I managed to fall into that minuscule percentage of patients who experience one of those possible-but-improbable complications during a routine endoscopy.

Anyone who has ever undergone any kind of invasive medical procedure is familiar with those caveats we tend to gloss over on the required waivers: *This procedure can result in certain complications, including death.* When you really think about it, though, what purpose does the warning serve? If the procedure is necessary, you're going to have it done anyway. And when I died, it wasn't as though I said to myself, "Well, I can't say they didn't warn me."

In fact, I wasn't even sure what was happening to me, though I did have the proverbial out-of-body experience. I had the sensation of floating out through the top of my

head and rising towards the ceiling, watching as the medical team tried to resuscitate me. Staff members began scurrying at once in different directions to their Assigned Responsibilities in the Event of a Life-Threatening Situation.

"I'm not getting a BP, Doctor," said a nurse.

"One milligram of epinephrine," Dr. Kreske ordered without missing a beat.

The nurse prepared a syringe and plunged it right into my heart. The team waited and watched as one -- forever, it seemed.

"Still no reading, Doctor."

Dr. Kreske's pucker factor must have gone into high gear when epinephrine didn't do the trick. He back-kicked a metal stool out of the way; it rolled into the wall and toppled over with a loud crash, but no one even blinked.

"Begin CPR," Dr. Kreske ordered while the crash cart was readied. Someone else yanked open my hospital gown to lay bare my breast. Once upon a time, I had fantasized about some handsome Jewish doctor doing just that, after which he would sweep me into his strong arms and carry me off to Nordstrom.

Good Dr. Kreske, unmoved by the bosoms splayed over the sides of my rib cage, situated the paddles and called out, "Clear!"

I arched an eyebrow at the dramatic warning. It wasn't as though they were standing in front of an airplane propeller.

The electricity made contact, jerking my supine body several inches off the gurney. Five faces looked toward the heart monitor with anticipation that turned to dismay at the persistent flat line. Dr. Kreske once more replaced the paddles and gave his throttle-up warning. My torso arched a little higher, thrusting my breasts upward in a macabre imitation of the seductive pose tempestuous vixens assume while in the throes of ecstasy.

I may have been tempestuous, but I was no vixen and nobody there was ecstatic. About forty minutes later, the team conceded the battle. Time of death was recorded as 1:17 p.m.

The whole situation had been so embarrassing from the start. It wasn't humbling enough in the first place that I had to see a gastroenterologist and describe in great detail my elimination patterns, complete with

illustrations. It wasn't sufficient that I, who usually avoided doctors in general, subjected myself to undignified tests while in humiliating, butt-baring positions.

A couple of visits later, I left Dr. Kreske's office with a prescription for a type of laxative new to this child of Generation X-Lax. Oh, I was familiar with over-the-counter pills and the fiber powders stirred into water to concoct a gritty, citrusy beverage, but this stuff resembled something in between bird seed and chocolate jimmies. While I was tempted to feed it to the birds, I was not about to sprinkle it over ice cream. So I did as the label instructed, swallowing a heaping teaspoonful of the dry granules and chasing it with a full glass of water.

Once in the stomach, the granules were supposed to absorb the water and spur the bowel into action. But the mission was sabotaged by a condition I didn't even know I had. A narrowing of my esophagus caused the granules to bottleneck, unable to proceed to their final destination. Gridlocked at this stricture, they absorbed the water I had drunk until swollen twice their volume, blocking the passage completely. It was like having a matzo ball stuck in your throat that you couldn't get down.

I could still breathe, so there was no need to panic. I phoned Dr. Kreske's office, feeling silly and distraught as I explained the problem in between dry heaves. The receptionist told me to have someone bring me to the hospital where Dr. Kreske would "work me in between procedures." I knew what *that* meant. He was going to push the offending stuff down with - gulp - an endoscope.

Reluctant to drag my husband Saul away from his office, I knew I could count on my friend Micaela to drive me to the hospital. She had the week off from work, anyway, and said she'd be happy to pinch-hit for Saul.

I worked my way through the hospital's administrative cubicles: one for registration, one for insurance information, one to find out where to go to wait to be told where to go next. At each stop I was obliged to repeat the mortifying explanation of my Ripleyesque problem until at last I was escorted to the procedure room.

They gave me a lovely cocktail of Demerol and Valium which promptly sent me to La-La Land, a desirable place to be when having a large medical implement inserted in your throat. I was grateful for my particular vulnerability to barbiturates (a single antihistamine could knock me out

cold), as I didn't want to be the least bit aware of the unwieldy instrument about to send my gag reflexes into overdrive.

When it was all over, the staff tried to rouse me but I didn't respond to repeated attempts. The mood in the room immediately changed from routine to tense. Dr. Kreske maintained an even strain, but I could almost feel the prickle of anxious sweat starting under his arms. Losing me would not be a feather in his surgical cap.

I'm sure no one anticipated such a virulent reaction to the narcotic night-night. Or maybe the barbiturate barkeep was pouring just wee bit too generously that day. Whatever the reason, the result was the same. But there was a bright side: at least I didn't have to wake up to find a jackhammer down my gullet. As the saying goes, I never knew what hit me.

There was no mystical revelation that I was about to expire, no defining moment when I came face to face with my own mortality. No fanfare of choir voices came to accompany me to the Great Beyond. I simply floated out of the body and rose upward like a balloon, observing the scene below with detached fascination from a corner just a foot or two

below the ceiling, while the medical team worked on the body.

Notice that I said "the" body instead of "my" body because the lifeless shell on the gurney with a sheet over its head wasn't me anymore. The Me that is Judith McBride was still very much alive and aware, encased now in another kind of body. Not flesh and bone, but something lighter and more whole. A dead ringer, you should pardon the expression, for the physical vessel my soul had just vacated.

My spirit body was as tangible to me as the earthly body had been, yet there were subtle differences I noticed right off. I felt more vital and energetic than I ever had on earth, alert to the slightest stimulus like I'd just awakened from a 31-year nap. A sense of tranquility banished any fears or uncertainties of the transition taking place.

Despite the rather odd circumstances surrounding my demise, I didn't feel angry or sad that I had died. Oh, a little annoyed, maybe. After all, nothing got my knickers in a twist more than the best-laid plans of mice, men, and Judith going astray. All through high school, Micaela had

teased me about being a control freak; she would go to town with this scenario. Judith McBride, dying when she didn't plan on it? Unthinkable.

I took a moment to examine this etheric body of mine and check out the new and improved me. I liked what I found. My hands ran over my hair and felt a silky thickness I hadn't known before. This wasn't the turmeric chaff I was used to. I tilted a shiny auburn lock this way and that, marveling at the color and texture. This was the hair I'd always dreamed of having, much the way women with poker-straight hair get perms and dishwater blondes go sun-kissed. Gone was the accursed frizz I'd had to flat-iron straight every morning of my life. I felt like Cinderella after the fairy godmother changed her rags into a ball gown.

My hands slid down the smooth skin of my abdomen to my thighs, where they froze. I brought my hand back up to my belly. For the first time in my life, I had a stomach so flat it was almost concave. I had never been much of a fashion maven, mind you, but it would have been nice to shop for anything that struck my fancy instead of ferreting out styles to drape over the small pot that made me look

like I'd swallowed a papaya, whole. There is a God, and he's a celestial plastic surgeon. I wondered if they had bikinis in heaven...

I turned to the nurses hovering near the mannequin-like corpse on the gurney. "Hey! What on earth happened?"

No answer.

I called a little louder. "Hel-LO-O! Hey! Over here! What went wrong?"

No one looked up, and it finally dawned on me that they couldn't hear my voice. But I heard them keenly, even though they spoke in hushed tones. I could even hear the staff in the next unit, and the receptionist down the hall.

A nurse went out to the waiting room to tell Micaela that Dr. Kreske wanted to speak with her. Micaela Pressman and I had been best friends since the seventh grade. She was everything I never was: a blue-eyed blonde who had never needed braces or control-top pantyhose. In high school she had been popular with everyone from the artsy drama types to the cheerleaders. Her academic achievements landed her a spot at Brown University where she drove her male colleagues mad when she studied in the sunny quad wearing a Brazilian bikini. Micaela believed in

multi-tasking: no reason why you couldn't get a tan while reading *Fundamentals of Microbiology*.

Our relationship spanned decades, longer than many of our friends' marriages. There were things Mic knew about me that no one else did, not even Saul. We were truly a bonded pair. Now she had the unenviable chore of breaking the news of my death to Saul. Poor Micaela. There's nobody on whom I'd wish this burden, but I hated that it had to be Mic. We hadn't bargained for this when we'd exchanged friendship necklaces in eighth grade. The silver pendant was half a heart with a zigzag edge as if it had been broken in two. Each half fit the other to recreate the whole heart. By these tokens we pledged unending sisterhood, come what may. At the time, we were thinking along the lines of major zit outbreaks and unrequited crushes, not untimely death and notification of next of kin.

My next of kin and I had often dreamed about someday buying a really big Airstream and touring the country at will. Now it looked like my immediate travel plans were limited to this near-earth location where newly-departed souls adjust to the afterlife. But how was I supposed to get around? Fly?

I shrugged and put one foot in front of the other, just like on earth. It worked. I was moving as though on a mechanical

sidewalk through an empty corridor that looked like a spanking new hospital before any equipment was moved in. I wished there was someone to answer all my questions, but I seemed to be all alone. I blinked at the light glaring at the end of the corridor and kept walking. I had no idea where I was headed; I just kept moving.

In short order I found myself inside a basement room at Goldblatt & Sons Funeral Home, morticians of choice for upscale Jews, the Fendi of formaldehyde. A radio was playing and Lou Goldblatt, Jr. was just putting the finishing touches to my earthly toilette. Lou was short, fat, and bald, hardly the sort of person you want doing your makeup. But let's face it, he wasn't Monsieur Louis, Beautician to the Stars. He was sweaty Lou, costumer of the dead.

Handiwork complete, he stepped away from the table and we were both able to get a good look at the finished product. The makeup gave new meaning to the term "matte finish," but the hair was the real problem. I looked like a flapper who'd danced one too many Charlestons. I guess Lou's wife Myrna hadn't bothered to look at the photograph Saul had provided. The wallet-size snap lay atop a scrambled sheaf papers on the dusty Formica desk behind the work table. She had fashioned a coif that only stick-

straight hair could carry off, certainly not my coarse mop. The result was Buckwheat meets Betty Boop. I flinched at the spit curls on my cheeks, longing to brush out all that Dippity-Doo and restore some semblance of me. What was Myrna thinking?

I gave Saul props for his choice of burial outfits: a five-year-old Evan Picone suit, powder-blue and taupe hounds tooth checks with a blue and taupe shell in a coordinating pattern. He knew it was one of my favorites, even though for the past few years the skirt had been tight around the waist and pulled slightly across the derriere. Guess I wouldn't have to worry about the ill-fitting skirt anymore. Lou left the back zipper open and even ripped the seam a little to give the front of the skirt a smoother appearance. In fact, the outfit had never looked better on me.

The distant blaze of light flared once, beckoning me. I hadn't gone more than a few steps when I found myself in a field of headstones with small rocks placed on top. Some had many rocks heaped on in a pyramid; others had only a handful neatly arranged in a row on top of the granite.

A cluster of people encircled an open grave. Muffled crying provided backup for a familiar voice that rang in clear tones.

Micaela was reading something from a book that lay open in her hands. I glanced from her to the plain pine coffin with a simple Star of David affixed to the lid. The scent of new pine struck my nostrils with a clarity that took me back to summer camp in the woods of Maine.

The surreal scene felt like it was a stranger's funeral instead of my own. My mother's chin wobbled and Micaela's voice quavered as she recited the beautiful passage from Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood*. It was one of my favorite poems. ...*though nothing can bring back the hour of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower; we will grieve not...*

Micaela finished the verse and folded the book closed, cuing Rabbi Kalman to begin the mourner's *Kaddish*. With each intonation, my body was infused with a sublime rush that spread to the tips of my toes and fingers, a rush that far eclipsed the giddy pleasure of being voted Fraternity Sweetheart two years in a row, the euphoria of helping a paralyzed patient walk again, or the dreamy elation of my wedding day. I became an ethereal sponge, soaking up love until I thought I could hold no more. If everyone on earth could know that each prayer, no matter how simple, really does reach departed souls and help in their

transition to the other side, more people would pray oftener and with greater feeling.

Saul took up a garden shovel and scooped a small mound of loose dirt that he tossed onto the casket partially lowered into the grave. As he handed the shovel to Micaela, the sun's rays bounced off wet paths on their cheeks. The scene almost had *me* crying...

The graveside service concluded and the crowd dispersed to their cars. I followed them back my mother's house, where there was more food laid out than I'd seen since last Thanksgiving. Food in mass quantities is *de rigueur* on Jewish occasions, a kind of go-with-everything accessory suitable for mourning or celebrating. Mom had ordered some deli platters, but relatives, friends of relatives, and relatives of friends also brought over briskets and roast chickens and desserts. Grieving works up a big appetite. My mouth watered as Micaela placed a cheesecake on the dining room table. I no longer needed to eat, but the sensory pleasure of it wasn't diminished by death. Happily, such delights are only enhanced in the afterlife. I'd miss the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee in the morning, the taste of chocolate-chip ice cream, the feel of a cashmere sweater against my skin ...

People I hadn't seen in decades were coming out of the woodwork, murmuring platitudes to Saul. *I know how you feel...it's God's will...at least she went quickly...now she can watch over you...* Poor Saul looked stricken, more so than at the cemetery. This open display of emotion was a rarity for my strong-but-silent man. Saul didn't always express his love in conventional ways, but I knew it was there. Now I felt his love at its purest, magnified a hundredfold. In death I didn't have to regret leaving loved ones behind. I took their love with me; the rest is insignificant.

Saul's sister Jessica stood by the dining room table with our accountant, a statuesque blonde named Mary Lynn Walker. There were two constants about Mary Lynn. One, she was forever correcting people who called her "Marilyn." Two, she always managed to find us sizeable tax deductions. I liked her, despite her drop-dead good looks.

Jessica was a different story. She was as pretty and innocuous as an angelfish, but inside she was all shark. Five years older than her brother and with a personality that came on strong, she had always tried to bend Saul to her will. She never asked, she decreed. The word "please" was not in her vocabulary, but somehow she got away with it. Accustomed to people doing as she told them, Jessica resented the fact that she never could

manipulate me in the same way. We maintained an unspoken truce for Saul's sake, but our mutual dislike was undeniable. Saul was as blind to his sister's true colors as he had been to my too-tight Evan Picone skirt. I knew that, and Jessica knew that I knew it. This enabled her to exploit his ignorance at my expense.

"So awful about Judith," Mary Lynn tsk-tsked.

"Yes, Saul's taking it very hard, though what he ever saw in her... I told him I'd take care of her clothes. It's not healthy for him to hang on to them. The sooner they're gone, the sooner he can get on with his life."

Mary Lynn flashed a Cheshire smile. "Why, Jessica, that's so thoughtful of you."

"I just happen to wear the same size as Judith, not that I'll find much in her wardrobe worth keeping." Jessica gave a resigned sigh. "I tried for years to teach her how to dress, but she rarely took my advice. Even when she did, she never could develop any real sense of style."

Mary Lynn glanced across the room at the unmerry widower. "Poor Saul looks like a lost puppy. I'll see if he wants to come over for dinner next week. He'll need to get out of the house and be with close friends."

A strange heaviness in my lower body stole my attention from the conversation. I looked down at my stomach, but it was unchanged: smooth and flat. Nothing about my spiritual body was different from a moment ago, yet now I felt like I was trying to swim to the surface in a waterlogged snowsuit, kicking and kicking but still dragged down. The grey mist swirling around me had become dense and thick with negativity from these two people pretending to mourn my tragic passing.

I bailed on the rest of *shivah* week, more than ready to move on to whatever awaited me in the spirit world. In retrospect, overhearing the Mary Lynn and Jessica might have been the best way - the only way - to propel me forward to the next level of afterlife.

Don't misunderstand me; I wasn't completely cavalier about my own death. I may have accepted the reality of it with good grace, but the idea didn't thrill me to pieces. I had a pretty nice life on earth: great friends, a fulfilling career, and a husband who never left the seat up. Chunky thighs notwithstanding, I still wore a size eight. All in all, I didn't have much to complain about.

But here I was, so I might as well make the best of it and get on with this dance known as life after death. But before I left, I wanted to say goodbye to Saul.

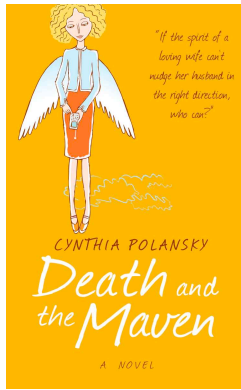
I found him alone in the bedroom of our house. I looked around as an objective observer instead of a recent occupant. Everything looked the same: the muted cappuccino walls and carpet, room dominated by the clean, spare lines of the Scandinavian furniture Saul didn't like at first but came to appreciate. He sat on the edge of the king-size bed, patting our Rottweiler, Max. Ginger the mutt was lying on my side of the bed with her head on the pillow where the last vestige of my scent remained. Was it my imagination, or did she look sad? Ginger had very expressive eyes that spoke volumes. I always knew what she was trying to say to me.

Saul, on the other hand, never spoke volumes with his eyes or anything else. Even in his solitude, his eyes were dry. But I didn't need tears to tell me what I already knew: that he was as devastated to lose me as I would have been to lose him. I yearned to reach out and stroke his hair, tell him everything would be okay. But I could only touch him from now on in ways he may not understand. When a spring breeze brushes his cheek, it will really be my caress he feels. When he smiles at the framed wedding photo on the bureau, it will be my embrace that puts the smile there. He wouldn't know it was me, but someday he would find out. He would just have to do it in his own time.

Of its own accord, my arm reached down to him. I cupped his chin in my hand, feeling the fine stubble that never waited until five o'clock to shadow his face. He reached up and brushed his neck with his hand as if to swat away a pesky gnat. His hand slid behind his neck to massage the knotty muscles. I took my own hand and placed it over his, sending soothing thoughts of love and peace to blend with his own strokes.

With a final sigh, he slapped his palms on the top of his thighs as if he'd indulged in self-pity long enough. He crossed to the door and paused there, looking around the room as though he would never see it again. The door closed behind him before I realized my hand was still outstretched in his direction. I was the one who wouldn't see it again. Not the way the room had been, full of the four earthly souls that occupied it. The life we knew together was over.

For now, anyway...



So thinks thirty-something Judith McBride, a Jewish control freak with an unlikely last name. When Judith dies in a medical mishap, she calls on her supernatural status to "rescue" her widowed husband from the sexy clutches of their gold-digging, thrill-seeking blonde accountant. But interfering with earthly events is strictly verboten and the repercussions ripple outward, deeply affecting not only Judith but the lives of her husband and best friend.

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