

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?

Catherine Deveney, *Scotland on Sunday*, June 2, 2002

IT'S hard to let go of the dead. Stop seeing their face and hearing their voice. Stop smelling their smell. Strange the way you can bury your face in their empty clothes and drink the dead in, the way the scent of them lasts longer than they did. Like the soul, we are told, outlives the body. Most of us just want the body back and you can shove that flowery talk of spirits and higher planes and better places. But there comes a point where you can find yourself clinging to anything. A scent, a memory, a photograph... And further down the line maybe, a medium in a darkened room. You have to do something with all that longing.

Novelist Julia Wallis Martin understands longing perfectly. She was just 20 and recently married when her husband Terry died. He was hit by a car travelling towards him on the wrong side of the road. The driver was 17 years old, returning from a Stockport nightclub in his father's borrowed car. Terry didn't stand a chance. He died at the scene but was resuscitated, then transferred to Liverpool for surgery. He never regained consciousness. "The accident happened at one in the morning," recalls Wallis Martin, "and the first I saw him was late the following morning. He was supposedly coming out of the anaesthetic and he wasn't on a ventilator. We all went home, and no sooner had we got home than the hospital contacted us and said, 'You'd better come back, he's deteriorating'.

And when we got back it was a completely different picture. He was on a ventilator and he was quite obviously dead. It was just horrendous."

It's obvious without being told when the engine that drives a person is gone, even when the vehicle's body is still intact. What's less obvious is where those inner workings have disappeared to. Two months after losing Terry, Wallis Martin went to see his mother and discovered she had consulted a medium. It was a comfort; Julia should try it. For the next four years Wallis Martin went from one medium to another, longing to be given evidence that in some unknown place, in some unknown form, Terry still existed. She never got that evidence. "I wanted very much to believe initially. I went thinking, wouldn't it be fantastic if someone could put me in touch with my husband. But I came to the conclusion that the majority of psychic mediums were either deluding themselves or deluding the public."

Wallis Martin, already an established thriller writer with a nomination for an Edgar Allan Poe Award (the highest American award for mystery fiction) to her name, has just written a new novel based on her psychic experiences. *Dancing With The Uninvited Guest* is a thriller that explores the world of psychic frauds who offer help in murder investigations. One of the central

characters, a parapsychologist called Audrah Sidow, has lost her own husband at a young age. The vulnerability bereavement brought made even a scientist like her turn to a psychic for comfort. But now, years later, that vulnerability has been replaced by anger and a determination to expose him as a fraud. Audrah's journey is Wallis Martin's. But she does not allow Audrah complete triumph at the end of the novel. How can you disprove the existence of the paranormal any more than you can prove it?

In the course of her research, Wallis Martin turned to a real life expert - American Professor Robert Morris, head of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit at Edinburgh University. Morris has to be less scathing than Wallis Martin. "Anyone making a strong claim either way, I am sceptical about," he says. "Someone who says it's all rubbish, I'm sceptical about, just as I am of someone who says it's all true." It is important, he explains, to find answers to what we currently find inexplicable. "If there is nothing to it, let's get solid information. If there is something to it, then our knowledge of ourselves is quite incomplete."

The public may imagine research is about ghost hunting and Poltergeist watching. But it's more than that. It's an attempt to examine the impact of things that can be neither seen nor fully understood: intuition, for example, or will power. "It would appear there are genuinely new, additional means of communication with the world around us that we don't understand," says Professor Morris.

Whatever those means of communication are, Wallis Martin does not believe they include mediums. "Often it was just rubbish," she says. "Silly women in a darkened room being dramatic." Was she ever frightened? "No. I was disappointed but never frightened. I used to think, 'oh God, here we go again'. Some gave a more polished performance. There were some psychics who were frightening but not because I believed they were in touch with the spirit world. What frightened me was their ruthlessness, the realisation that they were knowingly and deliberately tapping into people's vulnerabilities for as much as they could squeeze out of them."

For the psychic, there is money to be made. But there is also the reward of being needed, of being important. That brings its own pressures. "Many start out believing they have genuine powers," explains Professor Morris. "They attract attention but they don't always have a good day. So they learn a few tricks of the trade to fill in the gaps and then that pretty much takes over. I don't rule out the possibility that some mediums have some talent. We don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water but we do know there's an awful lot of bath water."

Wallis Martin thinks there is so much you could drown in it. Make an appointment with a psychic, she says, and they will quite cynically research you, finding out what car you drive, what job you have, which of your relatives have died and how. And that includes celebrity psychics. "When a celebrity psychic is coming to town, their coming is advertised, obviously.

They themselves go through the newspaper archives for tragedies that have occurred in the last 18 months and they memorise the details. Because if you are a person who has lost somebody in tragic circumstances, and you hear a celebrity psychic is coming to town, chances are you will go. They prey on the vulnerable, essentially, and they get vast sums of money out of some people. But they are also not averse to robbing the little old lady down the road out of 10 quid of her pension after she's lost her husband of 40 years."

Physically, Wallis Martin herself could seem vulnerable. There is something fragile about her, with her petite frame, blonde hair and softly spoken voice. Easily crushed you would think. Until you realise the vehemence behind the quiet words, the feistiness and the strength of will. Everything is reduced to rational analysis. Arguments are offered neatly boxed and labelled; behaviour is explained through psychological theories. St Paul's Damascus conversion was probably an epileptic fit. St Joan of Arc was a transsexual schizophrenic. Then you listen to an account of Wallis Martin's life and it becomes clear why she prefers neat answers and precision and logic. Her life evolved out of chaos. It would be surprising if she hadn't come to crave order. She grew up in a block of flats in a run-down, North of England housing estate, surrounded by decay. From her bedroom window, she looked out onto a row of derelict houses. Later she would write about those houses in her novel *The Bird Yard*: the way a local paedophile had stretched wire mesh from the roofs and filled it with exotic finches to lure children. Wallis Martin was as trapped as the colourful birds in the mesh of her own complicated home life. She lived alone with her mother, a manic depressive. "She was a nightmare," she recalls. "She was forever threatening suicide, saying, 'What would you do if I killed myself? Where would you live?' She was a very intelligent woman. Academically she was very bright, But she couldn't cope."

Wallis Martin could cope, though it was to be some years before she fully understood she was a survivor. Looking back now, she can even laugh at some of those terrible memories. "My mother was delusional. My family were devout Catholics and I remember her taking me aside shortly after my 14th birthday and telling me that, contrary to the teachings of the Catholic church, Jesus came from Venus and the only way to make contact with God was to climb up Kinder Scout, a mountain in Derbyshire, and pray to passing flying saucers. I just went, 'yeah, ok'. If you want to go to Kinder Scout we'll go to Kinder Scout. I thought, I'm not turning her loose on her own; we'll never see her again."

And yet the truth was that not seeing her again became the best option. It's hard to live without the dead but sometimes it is easier than living with them. Wallis Martin was just 17 when her mother died of breast cancer. "I make no secret of the fact that my mother's death was a relief. I am 45 and she's been dead 28 years, and there hasn't been a day when I've missed her. That's a terrible indictment but, you know, she was mentally ill and you

might as well blame someone for losing their leg as losing their mind. She was as she was." Did she love her? Wallis Martin hesitates, before becoming forthright again. "You know...em...no, I didn't really. That's awful. We think children should automatically love their parents and we get very distressed when it doesn't happen. But parents have to earn their children's love." And did her mum love her? "No, I don't think she did. I don't think she was really capable of it actually. She was so emotionally dysfunctional."

So emotionally dysfunctional that she abandoned Wallis Martin's half-sister when she was 11. "Her first marriage had broken down and she let her first husband have custody but then made no effort to keep in contact with my sister at all, which is bizarre. She had had an affair and I was the result of that affair." But if her mother kept her, didn't that suggest she loved her in her own way? "I don't know why she didn't have me adopted. I never asked her; never thought to ask her. There are many questions I would have liked to ask her later in life. They only came to me as an adult and it was too late. She was dead."

And so Wallis Martin was completely alone when her husband died three years later. "My mother had died and I didn't know my father. He had never been around; I had never met him. When you are on your own in that kind of situation you cannot afford to fall apart and you make yourself hold it together. Trouble is, we are all human and we don't have that kind of control over our own psyche, our own emotions, and gradually we break down."

Four months after Terry died, she found her world shrinking. She would be in familiar places but get panic attacks. She couldn't go further than two miles from her home. Then no further than the bottom of the road. Then to the bottom of the garden. Her doctor knew her agoraphobia was a symptom of something bigger and prescribed anti-depressants. Wallis Martin refused to take them, having watched her mother take pills for years without effect. "She was being given drugs like Valium and Librium which don't work for manic depression. She needed lithium. I just thought, what's this crap, and threw them away."

When her doctor threatened to section her, she was frightened enough to begin medication. And it worked. "Within three weeks I started to get the show on the road. Not in a big way. I still maintain it was a few years before I began to live anything like a normal life. But it was the turning point." Looking back, she realises Terry's crash was the moment she grew up. "I think I was quite immature and selfish in the way adolescents and people in their early 20s are. Me, me, me, the universe revolves around me, and if it doesn't I want to know why. I was involved in what I wanted out of life, and knew what my ambitions were, and what we were doing with our friends. It completely wiped all that away. It just wasn't important to me any more and it never became important to me again."

She was more resilient than perhaps she first thought. "I started to be quite successful in my professional life. I started to really move forward and, even though I got married and divorced in the years that followed, I can see a very definite pattern where I just went from strength to strength. I regard myself as having a very successful life, and if I were to analyse why, I would say it is because I took control and didn't have interference from outside. It's perfectly conceivable that my mother, who would have been 76 now, could still be alive and I would have had her to deal with. I haven't had that."

She married again when she was 27 and went to live in South Africa, where she began writing. But the marriage broke up and she returned with her son to England. Two years ago, she married again. But if, when she went to those mediums all those years ago, they had proved to her that Terry still existed, how would the story of her life have differed? "I'd have spent my life talking to him," she insists. "If you become convinced the person you have lost is there, in a recognisable form and always watching over you, it prevents you from moving on. It prevents you from getting your life back together. For instance, I am married again. I love my husband very much. But that does not betray my memory of my first husband or my love for him. I've never forgotten him; I still love him. If I had been in touch with Terry I wouldn't have got married again, or if I had I would have felt guilt-ridden because I would have felt he was there in the shadows saying, 'How could you do this?'"

Accepting that Terry wasn't looking over her shoulder liberated her. Perhaps she had a vested interest in mediums being frauds; it enabled her to have a life. We all have vested interests. We want to see our dead again. Or like Wallis Martin with her mother, we don't. "I can't imagine anything worse, frankly, than having my mother returned to me. She had better have changed or I don't want to know." Some want to believe in God. Others want death to be the end: peace and no accountability. Perhaps we would get more than we bargained for if we really did find proof of life after death. "You can always tell people who really do believe they have been contacted by the deceased," says Wallis Martin. "It is far from the comfort they thought. They become terrified. They do not go bouncing home saying, 'Guess what love, I've seen the grey lady!'"

She is careful to separate her views about mediums from her views on an afterlife. Certainly, she is not a churchgoer. "I think it's the western equivalent of dancing round a totem pole." But she does not rule out the idea that there is another existence. She simply rules out the possibility that we can access it while we are still on earth. "I am not going to say there is no afterlife. My experience with mediums has not resulted in me believing that death is the end. But I do not believe we are meant to know. I do not think the boundaries between the living and the dead have ever been crossed, nor will they ever be."

If they were to be crossed, she believes it wouldn't be with a medium. But even those of us who wouldn't go in that darkened room understand the drive to hold on to the dead that leads people there. Wallis Martin used to write letters to her dead husband, hoping that somehow the words would reach him. When my own father died, his shirts lay for months on the bedroom chair as if he were coming back to fill them. Sometimes, when I was on my own, I used to bury my face in them. How do you interpret the ensuing silence? Does the fact that we can't hear an answer mean no answer has been given? "The more we know," says Professor Morris, "the more we know we don't know."

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