



Ellie's
last chance
to find the life
she left behind....

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MATTHEW FOX

The Lovely Dark

A breathtakingly original story through the Underworld

READ AN
EXTRACT

The Lovely Dark

ELLIE'S LAST CHANCE TO FIND THE LIFE SHE LEFT BEHIND...

It was raining the day my grandmother died. It was three years ago, in the first wave of the pandemic. We weren't allowed to see her in the hospital; we weren't allowed to visit. We weren't allowed to be with her at the end: nobody was, and she died alone.

There was a video link but she didn't want us to see her like that.

That day, all I could do was sit by the window in my room and look out on the rain and wait, and hope. I had a book open in my hands but I couldn't focus on the words; my mind wandered and I found myself staring at the toy boat on my windowsill. It was a plain wooden boat with a square of white sail and a little matchstick figure in the stern, and I imagined it outside in the rain; it was in the gutter, and a surge of rainwater carried it racing towards the drain in front of our house. There was nothing that could be done, nothing the matchstick figure could do about it: the storm was too strong. I saw the boat spinning in the swirl of water above the drain, and just as it disappeared through the gap between the bars, the phone rang downstairs, and I heard my dad answer it,

and after a bit I heard him say, 'Thanks for letting us know,' and I knew that my grandmother had died.

She wasn't even particularly old, really; she was in her early sixties and full of beans, and by rights (so Dad said) she should have had another twenty years. I would have loved to have known her during those missing years: I could've used her advice, her help, her love, her no-nonsense approach.

But it's the way things go.

My dad didn't cry that day – although he did later. He just went out for a walk and didn't come back for hours, and when he did come back he was wet through and cold to the bone, and it was still raining.

It rained the whole night and all the next day, and late in the evening I saw a ghost.

I was at my window again, with a book in my hands, and when I looked up from my book there was my grandmother, coming along the street: a thin woman, in a grey coat, holding a black umbrella, walking briskly towards our house. She came up the steps, glanced at her watch and rang the doorbell.

I closed my book and went downstairs. I was alone in the house; my mum and dad had gone to make the arrangements with the funeral director.

The doorbell rang again, and I opened the door. The wind gusted in and my grandmother stepped over the threshold, and shook her umbrella, and the rain came off it like spray from a wet dog. Then she turned and looked at me, and her eyes went wide with surprise, and her face went white.

'I'm early,' she said.

'But . . .' I said.

But you're dead, I was going to say.

'Forget I was here,' she said. 'I wasn't here, understand? I was never here.'

She was already on her way back out the door.

'But Grandma,' I said.

She looked at me. 'I love you, Eleanor,' she said, and then she closed the door, and I stood there in the darkened hall, breathing hard.

I realised I hadn't told her I loved her back.

I quickly opened the door to go after her, but there was nobody there, only the wind and the rain, and when I looked up and down the road there was no sign of her.

No sign that she had ever been there.

I closed the door.

She was early, that's what she said.

Did that mean she was going to come back?

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