

My husband's spirit saved me

Inconsolable after the loss of her husband, Natasha Ponente decided to end her life—but then she had a visitor

Nearly two months after the untimely death of her husband of two years, Natasha Ponente had resolved to join him. Inconsolable at the loss of Leigh Benham, 31, Ponente, a state government business administrator, prepared to take her own life when, she says, Leigh appeared to her. Brushing her hair with his fingers while she lay in bed, Leigh soothed her and persuaded her to continue living, says Ponente,

34, who lives in Melbourne's Canterbury: "I knew in my heart that he was there." Ponente's story is just one featured in 'Love Never Dies' (Pan Macmillan Australia; \$29.99), the third book by Sydney author and WHO senior editor Karina Machado. "It was the spooky thrill of a ghost story that first sparked my interest in the paranormal," says mother-of-two Machado, 42. "But I've realised these kinds of experiences can be much more than just spine-tingling treats—they can change lives." Here, in an edited

extract, is Ponente's story.

Natasha Ponente stood at the altar of St Dominic's Church in Melbourne and stared out at 350 faces. Her trembling hand held the eulogy but her throat was as closed as her heart, shut tight against a world that could inflict so much pain. She took a breath and turned her

head to the right, towards the coffin, counting the roses on its lid in an attempt to calm down. To Natasha, it was now just the two of them.

"He told me one day we'd be together again"

She found her voice and began to read to her husband, Leigh, who'd exchanged vows with her in this very spot just two years ago. Tenderly, Natasha read him her eulogy, her final love letter.

Exactly two weeks earlier, on Dec. 14, 2012, Leigh had turned 31. There was much to look forward to in the young couple's lives. Summer

days were long, hot and pulsing with Christmas, and 2013 loomed, with its promise of huge changes ahead for the high-school sweethearts, who planned to buy a house and start a family in the new year.

That night, there would be a Christmas party thrown by Natasha's uncle, but it was also a surprise birthday party for Leigh, who, despite his youth and slight physique, would dress up as Santa for the children at the bash.

It was a lively night. Leigh, handsome in the G-Star Raw jeans and T-shirt his wife had bought him for his birthday, was in his element; chatting

to everyone, making sure guests were fed and watered, and walking them out with a heartfelt thank you at the end of the night. By the time he and Natasha got home, it was 2.45 AM.

Before shutting his eyes, Leigh turned to Natasha. "Listen, don't let me sleep too long," he said. "We've got to finish the Christmas shopping." Natasha promised not to let him sleep past 2 PM: "The last thing I heard was him snoring very, very heavily, then I drifted off to sleep."

The day after the Christmas/birthday party, Dec. 15, Natasha opened her eyes to the late-morning light.

Just after 2.30 PM Natasha realised she'd let Leigh sleep in too long. She bustled into the room and raised the blind, letting afternoon light flood the space. Her mirrored wardrobe doors and dressing-table mirror both reflect her bed in the centre of the room and Leigh was facing the mirrors. "Come on, wakey wakey," she teased his reflection, but then, it was as if her heart was freefalling out of her chest, to land with a thud at her feet.

"I thought, 'Why are you looking at me like that?'" With a wail she registered he wasn't breathing. "Leigh, Leigh, Leigh," she pleaded, bawling, as she began CPR and called the ambulance. "It was like slow motion. How I didn't drop dead, I don't know. The shock of it ... " Leigh's heart had stopped in his sleep. Though the paramedics restarted it, he'd been deprived of oxygen too long and Natasha held her husband in her arms at the hospital as he slipped away.

The pain of it was like nothing she'd known, like being eaten alive from the inside out, but there was Leigh's funeral to organise and she was determined to see it through with her usual thoroughness and attention to detail. She was alone in a foreign landscape where every signpost had been wrenched out. The successful and vivacious woman was struggling more than she would ever reveal to her friends and family. Rent with grief, incapable of facing a future without her soulmate, she began to plan her own death. On Friday, Feb. 2, 2013, Natasha says, "I went to bed and I knew that weekend, it was going to happen. >>>

Photographed for WHO by JESSE MARLOW



Natasha and Leigh on their 2010 wedding day, two years before Leigh's death.

LIFE AFTER DEATH?

"I saw that no matter how hard things get, and how low I can feel, I know there is something else now far beyond this world and lifetime," says Ponente. "And I hope [my story] gives people that hope as well."



Leigh (with Natasha in Melbourne in 2010) died of heart failure at age 31.



"That night, when I was ready to end my life and felt so alone and lost with nothing left, I was saved," says Natasha Ponente (in Melbourne on June 21).

INSETS: COURTESY OF NATASHA PONENTE (2)



Ponente by her husband's Melbourne grave (on June 16). The Italian inscription, which was also engraved on the couple's wedding rings, means, "Together forever, never apart."

Life-changing encounters

The seed for writing *Love Never Dies* was planted in Machado's first books—2009's *Spirit Sisters* and its sequel, *Where Spirits Dwell*. "Both had chapters about bereaved mothers sensing the spirits of their children, and these were the stories that most haunted me," explains Machado. "Mired in grief, it was only in sensing their late child's spirit that these parents were able to take a step towards healing. In some cases, these moments stopped them from taking drastic measures to join their child, they told me. This book celebrates these powerful and life-changing encounters."



'What am I going to do?' And he told me that one day we'd be together again, that there are too many things I need to do first, but then he would come and get me. I said, 'But when? Just do it now.' He said, 'No, I can't take you yet. You'll be OK. I'll never be away from you.'

Natasha woke up, her pillow "absolutely saturated" in tears and the unmistakable scent of Leigh's signature aftershave thick in the air. She could feel him brushing her hair with his fingers, as he'd always done when he was drifting off to sleep; it was a physical sensation. She is certain the timing of the visitation was no accident. "When he came to me that night, I believe he knew what I was planning to do. He was my saviour because no-one else would have gotten through to me, and I thank him for that. I honestly do believe that he saved me that night."

Memories of the bond they shared prop her up during the hardest times. On the day of Leigh's funeral, an exquisite moment from their wedding day bloomed in her mind. As Leigh's coffin was carried out of the church, and the soaring strains of "The Prayer" by Andrea Bocelli and Celine Dion filled the cavernous space, Natasha remembered how the song had played during their first wedding dance. Natasha recalls, "When we were dancing, I was crying and he wiped my tears away and said, 'I never want you to forget this moment in time, Bubby. If anything ever happens to me, just remember that I'm always going to be holding you like I am now.'" ■

When I set a rule for myself I don't break it."

At 4.45 AM the next morning, Natasha opened her eyes. As usual, she savoured a few moments' respite before reality presented itself, mountainous and rude, into the forefront of her mind. This time, though, it was tempered by a jolt of relief that she would soon be joining her love. She fell back asleep and dreamed she was in a large function room filled with computers resembling poker machines. "All of a sudden, Leigh was beside me and he was wearing the G-Star Raw T-shirt and jeans and he looked exactly like he always did. He had his hair the way he always wore it. I could smell his Chanel Egoiste. He was just Leigh,

in every way. I turned to him and said, 'Am I dreaming or am I awake?' He said, 'You're awake. I'm with you.'"

Natasha now realises those words, Leigh's words, marked the turning point in her healing—they were the first signpost in her alien world. She recalls their conversation: "I said to him, 'Do you know how sad and hurt I am?' He said, 'Yes, Bubby, I know, and I'm so sorry but I'm never far away from you.' I was

crying and he was crying and we were just holding one another. I could actually feel his touch on me! I could smell him. We had a full conversation. He said, 'I was with you. I know you tried to save me.' I said to him,

"I could actually feel his touch on me! I could smell him"