





# *Forty-Nine Days*

*A Sensuous Journey in the  
Modern Afterlife*

*Christel Janssen*

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*For Mama,  
and all the ones that lost their loved one*





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## *Author's Note*

NOTHING IN THIS book is made uglier or more beautiful than how I experienced it. It is a raw and honest recollection of my experiences and it is too absurd to make up.

I have tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from my memories of them and many saved chat conversations. To maintain their anonymity, I have changed the names of individuals and places. I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details—such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence—but the essence of the story is unedited.



One morning you wake up and say:  
“It was just a fairy tale.”  
You laugh at yourself, but deep down you’re not laughing at all.  
You know that fairy tales are the only truth of life.  
—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry



“...And so when the moment came  
for his choosing  
when his spirit refused to depart the body  
refused to leave behind  
what he felt was undone  
it was you  
he sought  
it was you  
who appeared at the window  
for no one else in his life  
had the ability to hear  
what he had to say  
and there was no one else he wished  
to be at his side

You who have often walked between worlds  
were ready for him  
ready to accept his need  
ready to believe in what he himself  
did not comprehend  
ready to greet with love  
what would bring others  
only fear  
and together you forged a connection  
that was beyond form  
and yet chose to be expressed in form  
in the spirit  
of the trickster  
once again giving voice  
to that which denies  
all we are accustomed  
to believe...”

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# Prologue

“I CAN SEE you! Can you see me?” a mischievous voice calls out loud.

I hold my breath, excited and anxious at the same time. I am sitting up in my bed, waiting for my mother to tuck me in. I stare with wide-open eyes through the dusky room. I scour the dark corner behind my bed, the cabinet with a moon-shaped shadow on it, and the painting on the wall that always seems to come alive.

“Some flowers only smell at night,” my mother said earlier that day. On this warm summer night, the windows are wide open, and the scent of honeysuckle enters my room.

“No, look over here,” I hear the voice sing again in a high pitch. I can clearly tell it’s coming from outside.

The blue-green cedar tree stands heavy against the night sky, directly in front of my window. Darkness looms in its branches. I sit up straighter than before. Kicking the sheets off my feet, I can feel the warmth of the sun radiating out of my skin. The blackbird in the tree starts to sing its evening song. His melody swoops up and down, up, down, down, down.

“Here!” I hear the voice again. This time, its tone is impatient. I see a figure appearing between the thick branches. Like mist or a cloud of smoke, a face emerges about halfway up the tree, right above the birdhouse. It is a man, somehow familiar. My body feels softer as I stare curiously at the vague presence.

Then I see him coming out of the dark blue sky, straight through the cedar, through the clouds. I see him coming into my room, right through the middle of the open window. There’s a soft buzzing sound from the almost invisible wings, like a fairy, as he comes directly toward me. I stretch out my little finger, and he quickly folds his wings as he lands on my finger, so that there’s only a little bug left. The little green bug, crawling

up to the top of my finger, has fragile little feet, tentacles sticking forward, and a triangular shield on his back. Its smell is so overwhelming that I don't know if I like it or not, but I am intrigued.

"Mom, come!" I yell, and I hear the fast clicking of her heels on the hard white tiles. The smell has me tumbling back into unfamiliar memories, reminding me of something I cannot grasp. It's so present, so big.

My belly tingles with excitement. My breath breaks into a fast pace. A sense of soda bubbles in my veins. Everything bubbles on the inside. It hits me in a moment. This presence, this figure, this face presenting itself now in this little animal is showing what makes it familiar. Even though we've never met, I recognize that he is my uncle. My mother's brother who never got to live. Who she never even met. And I know him, with all that I am. I tumble deeper and deeper into old memories, like horses running around us in wide fields.

"Mom!" I keep yelling. "Look, Mom!"

She comes hurrying in and kneels next to my bed.

I stare for a moment at her red-painted lips. "Look, Mommy, look!" I point at my left finger. I am sure she can see it too. I am sure she will get it and see all this little creature is.

I put my finger in front of her face, right in front of her eyes. I turn the bug slowly around and open my mouth, marveling at what I'm holding. Her blue eyes gaze at the top of my little finger. Her long eyelashes blink quickly. I tell myself she will recognize him—just like I do. She will hear the whispering like I do and recognize it as almost family.

"Oh, what a stench!" my mother says in disgust. "It's a stinkbug." She grabs it in one move and puts her thumb and index finger around it. She crushes it with her red nails, throwing what is left through the open window.

My mouth drops open. I freeze, a cry silenced in my lungs. I feel myself screaming a deep and silent "noooooo!"

"Come, let me tuck you in."

"But, Mommy, that bug is—"

"Just a bug," she declares.

I feel a shield cover my eyes, like the hard shield that was just crushed in front of me. The blanket feels too tight around my body. Things become

blurry. I feel I am sinking to the bottom of the ocean, like a treasure that is ready to be lost forever. Covered by sand. Scattered in pieces. The shield of denial, like wings now covering my eyes. Shadows enter the room, and I can still sense the smell lingering. That smell of green connects me to the cloud in the tree.

The water is running in the bathroom as my mother washes her hands. She flushes the experience away; the only green she can see is in the bar of soap in her hands. Her thoughts are somewhere else: downstairs with the dishes that need to be done, with my tired father, with our broken car.



*Part 1*

