

“Widowhood”

(from *Matters of Death*, “Incidents of Death”)

by Norman Weeks

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“The Widowhood of an Unmarried”

There was a young woman whose preparations for her wedding were stopped by the sudden death of her fiancé.

After an ardent courtship, the couple had set the date and proceeded with their plans. A church was chosen, a banquet hall booked for the reception, bridesmaids and groomsmen recruited and outfitted, the relatives and friends informed and invited, some scouting done for a new home for the couple, in short, all the necessaries in anticipation of a long married life together.

It was as the young woman returned home one evening, her finished wedding dress in the box in her arms, that she received the news. Her beloved had died, victim of what would be determined at autopsy as an undiagnosed heart defect.

The engagement was over. There would be no wedding. Death had intruded.

The young woman collapsed into the grief of lost love. The hope she felt for her future now turned to despair.

Instead of standing at her beloved’s side before witnesses and pledging a lifetime partnership, she stood weeping, surrounded by the same people who would have attended her wedding, and stared at the coffin that contained the body of the man she loved. What would have been a line of people congratulating the couple was now a doleful trooping of mourners mumbling their condolences.

As the body of her beloved was lowered into the grave, it seemed to the young woman that her own life was being buried with it.

The sudden death of the young man was a shock to all who had known him. His friends sympathized with his fiancée, now bereft, deprived by death of future happiness. Some of them held tighter to their lovers or thanked their own good fortune in having living, breathing spouses and prospects of long, fulfilling marriages.

She would get over it, friends thought. It was a terrible thing that had happened to her, but she would get over it. She was young. She would know love again, and, with new love, perhaps a marriage after all.

As much as the families and friends commiserated with the young woman, offered their sympathies and encouragement, and then thought that they knew how she would heal, none of them understood her at all. She would recover from the tragedy, but not in the way that they thought.

First, there did follow weeks of tears and sleeplessness, sharp pangs of remembrance of love, dashed hopes. Then months of missing him, that chronic ache of bereavement.

When she had recovered some, time having done what healing it could, the young woman came to an understanding of what her beloved's death would really mean to her life:—

She would go on without him; she had to. But she would go on without any other man. From very early in their acquaintance, she realized that he was the one for her, the only one for her, the man destined for her female fulfillment. Now that he was gone, there would be, there could be, no other. She came to that conviction, not in a perverse urge to torture herself or in morbid fatalism, but as a simple realization of a truth for her.

The mourning for what had happened gradually lifted, the fantasies of how the couple's life together might have been faded away. The young woman eased into a resignation almost religious in quality. She could accept now, would accept, not only the death, but the consequence of that death, the consequence for her own life and future.

She would live purely and virginal, the rest of her life a renunciation of sex and sexual love. She vowed so out of fidelity, for she felt that her betrothed was already her husband, if not by ritual, then by the consummation of mutual commitment to each other.

She belonged to him only, as he belonged to her, forever. His death had not really separated them; nor should her life, the rest of her life, do so. She would go alone among others, because he would always be with her, if not by her side then in her heart. She was already married to him eternally; death was neither annulment nor divorce. Death was only an imposed separation of their bodies, one that did not sever the union of their souls.

And so, she lived out her seemingly solitary life. What to others may have been interpreted as an unhealed wound or bitterness or contraction from life was no such thing. Her love lived, and she lived in her love. In that love, she felt no grudge or privation or paltriness of living. She had found the one for her, had been loved, and still loved; in those thoughts she found her happiness.

Others wondered why she never married. She did not do so, she would have told them, because she was already married, she who had never been married. She was not a widow, really, but a wife. She may never have recited the words,

“til death do us part”, but what she believed was “Death shall never do us part”.

Others may have pitied her, but she felt no pity for herself. For she knew what human fulfillment was. She felt fulfilled in the faithful steadfastness of her love.

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“No Longer There”

She opened her eyes and was surprised to see the back of her husband’s head still on his pillow. A first, she thought she didn’t know what day it was. If it was a Saturday or Sunday morning, he always slept late, so his head should be there on the pillow. But if it was a weekday, he should be gone to work. He left for work so early that she never saw him on the morning of a weekday.

What day was it? Why, Friday, certainly. What time was it? The sun was already well up.

She propped herself on her elbow and looked over her husband’s body to the clock on the dresser. 9:15. Even she did not usually sleep so late. Yet there she was, still in bed, and there was her husband. He had overslept.

She gently touched his shoulder and whispered his name. He did not respond.

She sat up, shook him harder, and called his name. His body was still.

Feeling a sudden panic, she leapt out of bed and ran to his side of it. Pulling back the covers, she looked at his face, the left side of it that was visible. She called his name again, but he did not hear.

She threw herself on her knees at the bedside and took her husband’s head between her hands, looking hard at the closed eyes. His head was a weight, like an inert object.

She cried out in alarm and flung back the covers onto the floor.

Pressing her body against his side of the bed, she kept calling his name, caressed his face and brow with trembling fingers. She lifted his hand, but it fell limp back onto the bed. She laid her head upon his chest; she could detect no sound within. She pressed her cheek against his mouth and waited for an exhalation that never came. Then she took his head in her hands again and kissed him full on the lips, trying to blow the breath of life back into him. It was only her own breath that came out of his mouth.

With the palms of both hands she caressed his body and called out his name, each time more feebly. She could not see him clearly now, because of the tears of her realization.

Suddenly, she recoiled from the bed and from her husband's body, backing away to the farthest wall. She stood there weeping and gasping and crying out, "Oh!". Her whole body shook in uncontrollable convulsions. She felt faint and backed into the wall for its solidity. The beating of her own heart frightened her.

After a few minutes, she took some deep breaths and wiped the tears from her face with the sleeve of the nightgown. She thought of calling 911, but she knew the futility of it. Why suffer the intrusion of strangers into her bedroom, when she knew it was past hope?

She approached the bed and slowly got back into it on her side. Lying down, she put her arm around the shoulders of her husband's body and drew it to herself. Cradling his head, she whispered his name repeatedly and held him close to her. Then, whether she fainted or fell asleep, she was not sure later, but she lapsed into an unconsciousness with her husband in her arms.

When she awoke, it was past noon. Her first perception was of the body of her husband still in her arms, her first awareness the recall of her earlier waking up. Gently, she disengaged herself from her husband. And, with her wakefulness, the tears welled up again.

For the next few hours, she wandered the silent house, taking in all its domestic details, now and then going into the bedroom to look upon the body of her husband. In her dismay, she thought she might find the bed empty—what had happened just a dream, a nightmare—, but her husband's body was still there, tangible and real.

Her panic had left her, but she felt a deep stab of the cruel shock.

At last, she made the necessary phone call. The ambulance came to remove the body.

When the paramedics rushed into the house, they were at first eager to attack her husband with resuscitation efforts. It took only a cursory examination for them to determine what she already knew. When she first touched her husband, there was a residual warmth to that part of the body that was under the covers, but his face was cold. From the first contact with his face, she knew.

She was permitted to accompany her husband within the ambulance.

Afterwards, the informing of the families and friends and her husband's co-workers. There was a large turnout for the wake and funeral, many people

approaching the widow and offering their condolences. A pressing crowd of people. Then, when she returned home, she was alone in the empty house.

In the first few weeks, the widow didn't sleep in that bed. Then, she crept back into it but couldn't fall asleep, as she lay staring at the dim outline of the empty pillow. It was only after many months that she could find comfort and rest in the bed.

Even now, each morning when she awakes, she remembers the usual Saturday or Sunday sight of her husband's head on the pillow. Now the pillow was always empty. He was no longer there. Would never be there again.

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“An Empty House and the Ache of Absence”

Familiar surroundings have become hollow and empty.

The very furniture seems bereft, the bed no longer to be warmed by the body of the beloved, the stuffed chair never again to bear his impress, the dining room tabletop bared of his elbows and the contact of his forearms and palms. The dressers and closets are shut repositories of clothes never to be worn again.

Household tools and implements have lost their usefulness in the absence of the one who used them. Every item in the house now seems a keepsake, memorabilia to be looked at for the rousing of memories, but not to be touched. The house has become a museum of memories.

Mere things, familiar things, but all of them associated with the lost beloved. Each one calls forth an image of his contact with them. These things are relics of lost love. Even though the survivor has no use for them, she does not consider throwing them away. They are sacred to her memory.

The space within the house, the air enclosed in the shell, is now void, oppressively so. That space was once animated by the presence and personality of the one now gone. The absence is all-pervading.

Even though she does not believe in ghosts, the widow's house is haunted. The bereaved mind invests the house with specters and images out of recollection, a continuing occupancy despite the gone-forever.

She is frightened to be home alone, frightened of her memories and their emotional effect upon her. When she arrives home, she comes in and turns on a light, looks around at the emptiness, and locks the door behind her.

A widow alone in her empty house, the sole resident of a home once shared. She hadn't really related directly to the house before; it was just the surroundings within which she related to her husband. But now she must

confront the house directly. She has lost any interest she once had in its furnishings and decoration. It was for his sake, or theirs, really, not her own, that she had tried to make the house homey.

Her body and mind have lost their most cherished human relatedness. She feels an ache in her breast; the whole front of her body tingles with longing for the press of male muscle against it. No more warm touch, moist kiss, comforting—deeply comforting!—embrace. Her body is stripped and shivering, reverted to its virginal forlornness. And her mind too. She no longer has him to talk to, to share, to unburden upon, to confide in.

Her ears long for that baritone timbre. But there is only silence. She soliloquizes, all her thoughts futile, her mind conjuring a repeating cycle of the same memories again and again. Those memories make her weep, not because of what they are, but because they are only memories. All she now has of him is memories. She wants them to console her, but they only deepen her grief.

She feels like Eve, the only woman, as if Adam had died and left her alone in the unpeopled world. For without that relatedness to her husband, she wants no other relatedness. He was her prime contact; compared to him all others were mere appendages. Now, as never before in her life, she feels what *alone* means. Even though she knows that sharp grief passes, that mourning has its period, that time is healing, she suffers the irrevocable finality of her new aloneness.

All that she is—human, female, woman, person, member of a family and a society—suffers bereavement. What is now missing in her life, what has been taken away from her outbalances all the riches of her living. She carries on now not in a continuation of her living, but in loss and lack and absence of the one missing.

A widow's consciousness, the one recurring thought, is of the nothingness that has happened to her. Her life has been emptied of its purpose, of its very liveliness. Every day is an ordeal of privation. She has lost interest in everything and everybody. Even her instinct for self-preservation has become feeble. She has no appetite for food or life.

How many and varied and recurring all those thoughts about the absent one! Grief is obsessive, mourning is chronic. The ache of absence strikes deep, and throbs, and persists. There can be no complete disengagement or total forgetting.

The loved one who dies takes away much of our own life. What remains of life to the widowed is a living-out of the loss. All that is left of love is the ache.

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