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by
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Widow's Walk

"Widow" is such a loaded word. It is filled with pain and drips with pity. It screams old and helpless and is almost always preceded by the word "poor." It evokes images of hags and crones with dowager humps wearing black babushkas and carrying groceries in little nets.

The first time Lori MacMartin heard herself called "The Widow" she didn't respond. She was in a fog of grief. The word didn't refer to her. It didn't apply. At least, it never had. It didn't fit. It weighed her down like an overcoat that bowed her shoulders and shriveled her soul. So she ignored it and waited to hear her name called. Finally, when she heard her name attached to her newly acquired title, she pulled a De Niro: "You talkin' to me?" Her attitude was straight out of *Taxi Driver*.

The funeral director apparently didn't notice Lori's irritation. He ignored her rather pointed announcement that she was Lori MacMartin, wife of the deceased, James MacMartin. She had wanted to say, "Wife of the dead man." "Yes, the widow," he repeated with a sense of self-important correctness that infuriated her. Then, he took her arm and patted her hand with an overly avuncular air. Lori had never met this man before; when did

she give him permission to handle her? She pulled away with a shudder as he began to discuss "her loved one's passing."

Passing? What test did Jim pass? The problem was that Jim had failed the tests. All the tests. His heart had stopped. His breathing had stopped. His brain no longer functioned, and neither did his kidneys nor his liver. It was a medical failure and Jim was dead. He had not passed a damned thing, except maybe gas. Oh my God, I'm making bathroom jokes in my head! What's wrong with me? Lori immediately justified herself by remembering that Jim would have thought it was funny. Her impending giggle-fit helped to assuage her anger, but she quickly repressed it when she saw the look of shocked disapproval on the funeral director's face.

Lori earned his disapproval again as they looked at caskets. Her only request was that she not be shown any caskets made by the MM Casket Company. The director looked at her quizzically, but complied. The sign on the wall that pointed down the basement stairs read "Showroom." *Like an auto showroom? No money down, drive off the lot?*

As they entered, Lori was dumbfounded. *God in heaven, a casket cost more than a Chevy! Who knew that they came in sizes? Or that there were only a few available for tall men?* Finally, after listening to the man prattle on about the advantages of silk satin over polyester (for Jim's comfort, of course), she tuned out and wandered about the showroom. Over in a corner, back against the wall, she found a reasonably nice, probably large-enough, casket. It was made of dark burnished metal, with antiqued brass handles, and it exuded tasteful masculinity. *Perfect.* The funeral director scurried over, all the while shaking his head no.

"You don't want that one, my dear."

"Why? Has it been sold?"

"No, but I couldn't possibly let you have it. It won't do at all."

"Why not?"

He went to one end of the casket and expertly executed a three-point turn of the box to expose the back to her view. On one side, near the foot, there was a small, shallow dent. She examined it closely. It didn't look too bad; in fact, it was hardly noticeable. But, it was there. She asked to have the box opened, which the man did quite reluctantly. At her insistence, he lifted the ivory silk lining. The dent was not visible, and the price, sold "as is," was right.

"It would never do to put your loved one in a damaged casket. It shows such disrespect, such lack of concern. What will his family think?"

"I am his only family. Jim will never notice the dent."

The funeral director shut up after that.

This was a play, or maybe a game, written by someone else and played by other people. Lori didn't know the rules but she was expected to stick to her assigned role. The only person who would have gotten her jokes, had she spoken her thoughts aloud, was Jim, and Jim, of course, wasn't there. He wouldn't ever be there again. Not to laugh, or help, or even yell at her. She was alone. Jim was her only family. His parents had been killed in a car crash the week of his high school graduation. Her dad had died when Lori was five; her mother died the year after Lori and Jim were married. They had never been blessed with children. *Alone. I am all alone now* was the only thought she could hold onto for more than a minute.

Wakes are a marathon, a special kind of torture reserved for the grieving. At the time when they most want to be alone to lick their wounds and hide from the world, widows are put on public display, at the very moment when they look and feel their worst. Widows are expected to sit directly in front of their dead husband's body and speak politely to any and all who show up to offer condolences. What Lori wanted to do most

was to rip out her hair, scream like a banshee and run away. Yet she sat there just as she had done when her mother died. Only this time there was no Jimmy to lean over and whisper just the right words to get her through this ordeal. It was one more moment, one more sympathizer, on and on and on.

The simpering, silly language used by the funeral director put Lori's teeth on edge. At first, she put it down to the fact that the man was just an ass, until she realized that suddenly everybody simpered when they spoke to her. Nobody used names; they all spoke in code. Jim was no longer James or Jimmy, he was "The Dearly Departed." *What? Had the man recently gotten onto an airplane and just flown away? Departed for where? Did he get to pick his destination? If he had just departed, when the hell was he coming back?*

The language code was most obvious among the acquaintances and looky-loos who came to Jim's wake. "Sorry for your loss" was the refrain. Her first response was to protest that she had not "lost" Jim. *He was not like the cellphone that she had left on the subway, or a glove forgotten in a taxi. The problem wasn't carelessness. It was death. He had died and would not come back. Didn't these people get that? Or were they afraid to speak the real words? Was it some sort of visceral, pagan thing? By not speaking any of the real words like "death" and "dying" aloud, could it somehow be avoided? If it wasn't named, then maybe it didn't really exist? Was that the thinking? Perhaps they were trying to spare her the reality of the situation. By using euphemisms did they think that she wouldn't notice that she had lost her whole world? Didn't they understand that everything had changed and would never be the same?*

The formula phrase was usually followed by a hug. Lori tried to offer her hand, but, by and large, her hand was ignored and she found herself pressed to the breasts of countless people she either didn't know or didn't like. Lori actually liked to be hugged, she just preferred to know and like the person whose

arms were around her.

Friends, she realized, usually started their condolences by saying, "He will be missed." The follow-up generally included a shared joke, an antic, or a remembered kindness of Jim's. They spoke in realistic, specific terms that told of the man they actually knew. Many remembered how his eyes crinkled when he smiled, and some were kind enough to say that Jim's smile was especially joyful when he looked at Lori. These people actually helped. It didn't take away her heartbreak, but somehow it helped to know that her grief was shared among so many. Lori had never been accustomed to sharing her feelings with anyone. Jim had charmed his way into her heart, and while it hadn't been easy, he had broken through her defensive, sarcastic humor and taught her to talk about the important things, not just the easy things.

Jim's closest friends all arrived together. These were men with whom he had gone to high school and had kept in touch with all through college and while they served in the military. Each one, the Irishman Mike, the Pole Stephan, and even the two German brothers, RJ and Charlie, sported a Black Watch plaid tie. Jim would have loved it.

The friends still held a monthly poker game and attendance was almost mandatory. If their girlfriends objected, they generally didn't last long enough to become wives. The friendship was so strong that it functioned as a brotherhood. They knew each other's foibles and sins, habits and hates, and tolerated them all. This was Jim's family and, by extension, Lori's. She loved them all and their show of support touched her heart. She was held close by each man, but it was Charlie who made her laugh. As she touched his tie, she felt a bump. Turning the tie over, she found the price tag. He wasn't prepared for Jim's death any more than she was. It was oddly comforting.

Abruptly, the quiet, maudlin funereal Muzak stopped. The

joyous notes of Glenn Miller's "String of Pearls" began to play. Swing music was the soundtrack of her life with Jim. It wasn't the music of their generation, but he loved it, and he loved to swing-dance. Jim had given her pearls for her birthday the first year that they had been together, before their engagement. Lori had put those pearls on in the morning, now she touched them with the same reverence and joy that she had felt the first time she had worn them. She had cried then and she wept again now. The music momentarily made her feel as if Jim were with her, and she was grateful for that. She looked around to see who had changed the tapes and saw the poker buddies nudging each other with satisfaction.

Finally, after what seemed like decades, the funeral director announced that the funeral home was closing and that it was time for the mourners to leave. He announced the time and the place of the church service the next morning, then expertly ushered the whole crowd of people out the door. Lori was exhausted, but dreaded going home to her empty house, her empty bed.

RJ volunteered to drive Lori home, while Anna, Stephan's wife, agreed to follow them in Lori's car. Lori was glad that it was RJ who was driving. He was the quiet one of the group and she was looking forward to silence. But to her annoyance RJ prattled on and on about nothing. He talked about the weather, his latest loser girlfriend, his car, and about how much trouble he had finding ties in the Black Watch tartan. Finally, he pulled the car over to the curb. "Oh God, Lori, I'm going to miss Jim so much. All my life he's been my rock, the guy I depended upon to tell it to me straight. I can't believe he's gone." They cried together at the side of the road until a police car drove up. Patrol lights flashing brightly, he approached the driver's-side window and tapped on it with his flashlight. The he shined the light into their eyes.

"This ain't no lover's lane, you know. It's a public highway. Let me see your license." RJ lowered the window and tried to explain the situation. It was clear that the cop didn't believe RJ's story until he took another look at Lori. Her head was down, her hair covered most of her face, her shoulders were shaking, and she had a wad of tissues in her hand. He shined his light over them a few more times. Then he said, "Get a grip on yourself, man. Drive the lady home and get some rest. Both of you."

RJ thanked the officer, pulled out into the traffic carefully and slowly, and drove to Mike's bar. As soon as RJ closed the window, he began to apologize. He stuttered with shame at embarrassing her. Lori lifted her head, shook her hair back and off her face, and began to laugh. It started with a giggle and escalated into loud, convulsive, hysterical laughter. She just couldn't stop laughing.

"We were almost arrested for petting on a public street. He thought we were lovers!" she burred, then started to laugh again. RJ laughed along with her, but he had an odd look on his face.

They pulled up in front of Mike's bar. Anna pulled in behind them. As agreed, she had followed RJ's car. When he was pulled over, she had pulled over and waited. "I didn't want to interrupt, but if you guys needed anything, I thought I might be of help. You know, if the cop had taken out his ticket book, or asked RJ to walk a straight line, something like that," she explained.

"So you spied on us?" asked RJ.

"Oh no, it was nothing like that. I just waited to see if I could be helpful."

He responded with a quiet and sarcastic, "Right."

"These guys were almost arrested," Anna shouted as she walked into the bar. The rest of the poker crowd was already there. Anna told what happened while RJ tried to explain and Lori filled in the blanks. Everybody laughed uproariously.

Everybody but RJ; he was still embarrassed.

Mike and Colleen took charge and put out a hamburger plate for Lori, with rare meat, rye bread, double cheddar, and mayo for the fries. Exactly how she liked it. Once the group saw that she had actually eaten a few bites, they relaxed. So did Lori. She hadn't had a real meal since the highway patrol had arrived on her doorstep to tell her about the car crash.

Mike came out from behind the bar to distribute double shot glasses. Then, he brought forward a bottle of Dalmore 12, Jim's favorite. Once they all were served, he raised his glass to the heavens and offered a toast.

"Up the MacMartin!"

"Up the MacMartin!" the group responded, then they each downed the single malt in a gulp.

"Still sounds like 'fuck you' to us non-Celtic types," murmured Stephan, as he usually did. More scotch was poured and another toast was offered. Arm held high, Mike turned to the bar. Behind it was a photo of the boys in cap and gown at their high school graduation.

"To James MacMartin, who was the best friend any of us ever had."

"To James MacMartin!" the crowd repeated.

The whiskey helped to dull Lori's pain. After a while, it felt as though Jim were just on a business trip. Mike's Place was the gang's home away from home. On any given night, Lori knew, one or another of the poker crowd could be found at the bar, watching the game, or playing darts, or just chatting. It almost felt like a normal evening with her friends. Then she would remember what had happened, and the pain was so sharp that she could hardly breathe.

Several whiskeys and many stories later, Mike held up his hands and signaled for silence. "It's getting late and we're all going to have a rough day tomorrow. But, it is only right and

fitting that we end this with Jimmy's favorite story. I know that I can't tell it as well as he could, and I might forget a few details, but I'll try to do it justice. Okay with you, Lori?"

She didn't know whether it was okay or not, but she nodded yes.

Mike put on his Irish storytelling voice and began. "Now, this all happened in the '30s, deep in the Depression days, in a small town in Tennessee. Don't remember the name of it, which is probably just as well.

"Bank robbers, Bonnie and Clyde, or maybe Baby Face Nelson, or maybe Dillinger—it was one of those famous gangs that thrived in that era—had hit the town's only bank. Jim's great-uncle was the town's sheriff. It was a department of one, and an elected position at that. Reportedly, the guy only got the job because his father-in-law—that would be Jim's great-grandpa—had a lot of clout and figured it would be cheaper to get the son-in-law elected than to give him a job. He was a good-looking Barney Fife type. Body by Fisher, brains by Mattel, was the description.

"Anyway, somehow this mope finds the gang hiding out in a cabin in the woods. Remember, this was before cells or hand-held radios, so he has no backup and there were no deputies. But he decides to rush the place anyway. He goes in, guns ablazing, and manages to hit one of the robbers before he himself goes down, filled with lead. It must have been during deer season, because the noise alerted some nearby hunters who ran to the cabin. They captured a couple of the gang members and recovered most of the money, but the rest of the gangsters had fled in a Packard sedan, never to be seen again.

"The home town paper puts out a special edition, wrote up the story in its best purple prose, and wrapped it in a banner headline surrounded in black. The local sheriff was declared a fallen hero. Great-grandpa still thought the guy was a mope,

but family is family. If the town thought that the guy was a hero, then who was Great-grandpa to argue?

"Great-grandpa was the biggest mogul in the area. He owned the MM Casket Company, which was the largest employer in the county. In the '30s this was a really big deal. People would practically bow down to the old man if they met him on the street. His pride and his reputation were on the line, so he decided to go all out for his daughter's husband. Nothing would do but to give the boy the best sendoff that money and clout could provide. He ordered his factory to build an over-sized bronze box, with sterling silver adornments, and a satin-and-lace interior.

"What good is clout if you can't use it? Marketing a casket company is very, very tricky. Dancing girls and hucksters are out. It has to be very low-key and subtle. Although potential clients are steadily available, in bad times it's tough to move the high-end merchandise, with all the profitable extras. Only the wealthy and the self-important bought expensive caskets in a depression. Then Great-grandpa had an idea. He had a hero on his hands, and nobody loves a hero more than a politician. And nobody is more self-important than a politician. Perhaps, he could do a little show-and-tell, maybe even snag some pre-planned purchases. So he asked the mayor of the town to be one of the pallbearers. The mayor accepted with alacrity. In fact, he thanked the old man for the privilege of honoring the hometown hero. He was so easy to enlist that Great-grandpa decided to go for broke. By the time he was done, the list of pallbearers included the mayor, the county chairman, two state senators, and a U.S. congressman. The old man reserved the last spot for himself. His wife would never forgive him if at least one member of the family wasn't a part of the ceremony."

Mike stopped his storytelling for a moment, to see if this was too painful for Lori. It was difficult, but she nodded for

Mike to continue.

"On the morning of the funeral the weather was nasty—cold and gray with a steady drizzle—but it didn't stop the entire town from turning out to see their local hero well and properly buried. The old man had shuttered the factory for the day—the hero was family, you know—and that had started a chain reaction of respectful, cost-effective, one-day business closings throughout the town. Legend has it that the local schools closed as well. The church was filled to overflowing. People stood outside in the elements to catch a glimpse of the bereaved.

"Because it was such an august occasion, everything took more time than usual. The minister's prayers were more ornate and more sonorous. The eulogies were windy and plentiful as everybody took as much time in the spotlight as they could. The final walk by the bier took over an hour. The procession to the cemetery included almost every car in the county. There were Packard limos for the mourners and Cadillac sedans for the politicians and the well-to-do. The rest of the town followed in anything with wheels, from Model T Fords to Chevy pickup trucks. Way at the end of the line there were buckboards and even a few men on horseback. The weather was still nasty and the road was slippery with rain.

"The MacMartin family plot, as befits the leading family of the town, was at the top of a small hill near the entrance of the cemetery. The hearse parked at the bottom of the hill; the other vehicles lined up along the road next to the cemetery's tall wrought-iron fence. In those days, they didn't make those collapsible rolling things to move the casket. You really were "carried by six." So the politicians had to grapple with a two-hundred-pound, six-foot man inside a bronze box with silver trappings. It was a really heavy load to carry, in more ways than one, and these pallbearers weren't used to such physical labor.

"The rain had turned most of the cemetery ground to mud. The long grass and wet leaves made it difficult to walk at all, it was nearly impossible to go uphill carrying such weight. Backs bowed and knees almost buckling, the mayor, the county chairman, the two state senators, the congressman and the Mogul struggled slowly and mightily up toward the burial site, step by painful step. Suddenly, the pallbearers' backs snapped straight up, and a mourner screamed, 'Oh my God! The bottom fell out of the casket!'"

Mike stopped speaking for a moment. He took a sip of water and then continued.

"You have to remember that this happened in the '30s and some burial practices were different then. In those days, it was fairly common practice for men to be buried in an odd kind of shroud. From the front it looked like a formal dinner jacket and covered only the top half of the body. The bottom half of the body, from the waist down, was totally bare.

"So, essentially, when the bottom dropped out of the casket you had a man with his private parts exposed for all to see, sliding feet-first down a rain-slicked hill. The brass bottom of the casket functioned as a luge, and with the body on board it quickly picked up speed as it careened down the hill.

"The widow did what any good Southern girl would do; she fainted dead away. The dead man's brother thought fast and tossed his raincoat over the body as it whizzed past him.

"The politicians, still holding the casket, fell forward, uphill into the mud, when the casket lightened so suddenly. The sled continued flying down the hill and went under the wrought-iron fence. The body flipped up into an almost standing position as it hit the fence and hung there wedged between the bars. The raincoat slid off. So the people of the town got to see their local hero in all his splendor and glory as they said their final farewells.

"Jimmy never knew what happened after that, but he did know that Great-grandpa sold the casket company a few years later. And that is Jimmy's family funeral story. Good night everyone. Drive safely."

The group left the bar with tears of laughter mingled with tears of sorrow that the Jim could no longer tell his story. *Maybe the Irish were right; laughter and liquor helped to ease the pain.*

Once again, RJ drove Lori home and Anna followed. When they got to Lori's house, Anna came in with her, saying, "I'm sleeping in the guest room. You shouldn't be alone right now."

Lori didn't argue; she was just exhausted.

The morning of the funeral came too early. Sleep had not repaired Lori's cares. Her eyes were puffy, her back ached, and her hair had tangled into knots. She was not ready to deal with this day. She just wanted to hide.

Anna came in carrying a tray with coffee and cream, bagels, cream cheese, and lox. There was also a bottle of vitamins on the tray. She put the tray down on the dresser with instructions to eat. Information followed. Lori's suit had been ironed, Colleen was taking care of the reception following the service, and the limo would arrive at nine thirty. All Lori had to do was show up. *I don't want to show up, I just want to hide and maybe find a sleeping pill to knock me into next week. Then, maybe, I'll be able to deal with this.* Dutifully, unable to argue, she walked into the shower and began to get ready.

The stretch-limo arrived on time. It wasn't what Lori expected. Mike, Stephan, RJ, Charlie, and Charlie's wife Julie piled out. Stephan kissed Anna and put his arm around her waist. He then turned to Lori to explain, "We figured that you didn't want to look like the Queen of England sitting all alone in the back seat, so I had the office order this. I hope you don't mind, but we figured we were Jim's family, too."

"Oh God, you are. You are." The first tears of the day rolled

down Lori's cheeks.

St. Matthew's Church was almost filled with mourners as Lori walked in alone. Head up, focused only on the casket, back straight, she marched down the center aisle of the church, following the flag-draped coffin. It was the hardest walk she had ever taken, but she owed it to Jimmy to do it right. Behind her, a bagpiper skirled "Amazing Grace." *The boys thought of everything Jim would have wanted, except finding a way to keep him from dying.*

She took her seat between Julie and Anna and held their hands. She knew she should be paying attention to the service, but she kept thinking of the last time she had marched down the center aisle of St. Matthew's. It was her wedding day. She had walked alone that time, too. But then she had focused on Jim's joyous eyes and their future together. Anna handed Lori a wad of tissues and squeezed her hand.

Charlie and Stephan offered eulogies. Mike and RJ did not. RJ was clearly too broken up to speak, his shoulders shook with sobs. Mike explained later that he had done his speaking the night before. "I can offer toasts, I can offer humor. I cannot offer a eulogy, I don't know how to say goodbye."

There was no graveside service. The local VFW post provided volunteers to perform the flag ceremony in the church. As they folded the American flag into a tight triangle, Lori watched with pain. *What am I going to do with another American flag? I've got too damned many American flags! I have Grandpa's, I have my Dad's, and now they are giving me Jim's. How can anyone cope with so many flags?* A pair of white-gloved hands offered Lori the flag. She took it, and hugged it to her chest. The sound of a bugler playing "Taps" broke her up completely. *All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.*

Julie cuddled Lori's huddled body into her chest and led her to the church annex ladies' room. Lori's makeup case was there

along with tissues and hand cream. Anna had remembered to take Lori's purse. *They really had remembered everything.* She splashed water on her face and made an attempt to put on makeup and lipstick and look presentable. She didn't really care, but she was going through the motions.

Lori's eyes opened wide at the scene in the church annex. It was such a surprise. Colleen met her at the door. "I didn't think you'd want the usual church ladies' potluck and casseroles. So I did my thing." Linen tablecloths and napkins, china plates and floral centerpieces of pink and white roses, Lori's favorite flowers—all had transformed the room. Hot catering dishes filled with food were aligned along one side of the room. Along the other, there was a coffee urn and a selection of cakes and pies. "The church ladies did the desserts. I couldn't let them off the hook completely, they'd be insulted," Colleen explained.

The rest of the day was a blur. She stayed seated as people once again offered their condolences. *Now I know why people stay seated at wakes. It avoids crying on everybody's shoulders.*

She didn't avoid the hugs and kisses of Jim's closest friends, they really were her friends now. They had done everything that they could to show how much they had loved Jim—to show how much they loved her, too.

Finally, it was over and she had to leave. She got into the limo and was driven home. She was exhausted and on autopilot.

As always, she walked up the front stairs, put her key in the lock, opened the door, and called, "Honey, I'm home."

Silence answered.

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