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## A Widow

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## A WIDOW

### *Two Weeks Have Gone By, And*

the dogs no longer sprawl on the family room sofa, staring at the hall door in patient expectation he'll stroll out of his bedroom and growl, *You two critters, get down off the couch!* She donates his clothes to charity, "so someone can get good use out of them." Sunday, she makes jam, so the flats of strawberries from Farmer's Market don't go to waste. Floral tributes wilt in every room, mostly stargazer lilies. She cancels his credit cards, driver's license, car insurance, membership in the Discount Buyers Club of America and The Mystery Book Guild. *Identity theft is a problem these days and the dead are prime targets. Be sure to inform all creditors, banks, anyone with whom the deceased did business.* His colleagues drop by, bearing more lilies and Danish lace cookies. Some weep in disbelief, and she comforts them.

### *Free Ice Cream*

Sixteen phone calls later there are still so many people to break the news to. His barber, who cries; their accountant, so sick his voice has thinned to a gassy rasp. No quick, merciful end for that man. He lingers another month. Then there's the ice cream store girl who remembered the husband always wanted rocky road, and scooped it without being asked. She gives the widow and her daughter free ice cream.

### *Under The Rug*

Oh, what a treasure hunt! Where did he hide the deed to the house, his will, the health insurance

forms, the plastic trash bags—the big kind that tie at the neck—the hedge clippers, the opera tickets? His blood is expunged from the hall rug where he fell, hitting his head after his heart seized. Now there's not even a bleached spot. When the widow told the cleaning lady that he'd passed away, she insisted on staying to do her day's work. She put in five hours vacuuming and crying, dusting and sniffing, crying and ironing.

### *Nightlife*

In dreams she relives his sudden, unexpected death at a more graceful pace. He grows sick and dies gradually, reasonably in these dreams, propped on white pillows. She feeds him. They talk and talk. Nothing's abrupt. All proceeds as languidly as water ballet. Everyone behaves just beautifully. This second, slower take on his death is so soothing, like a play where actors take time with their lines, making the most of their moment to step forward and address the audience. Nothing in these dreams is drawn from real life. In them, she never comes home after dropping the dogs off to be groomed to find him napping at noon (unusual, but not unheard of.) There's no jolt when she settles a quilt over him and kisses his forehead, no bolt of fear as what touches her lips, once his brow, is now a cold vacant dome.

### *Flocks of Birds*

A troop of quail begins to visit her. A male and his harem. She rigs a birdbath for them in the backyard, hangs feeders and fills them with peanuts and seed, watches birds and squirrels through the dining room picture windows as she drinks coffee. She cuts her long hair. Her first shearing in forty years. She looks younger, friends tell her.

The husky whines to be let out to chase quail.  
*I have a lot to live for* she informs her daughters,  
a statement she finds strangely true.

### *Late Night Radio*

Since his death she sleeps with his old radio  
pressed against her ear—the transistor he'd  
listen to with an earplug while patrolling the quad  
at lunch, checking boys' restrooms for smokers.  
All through the appalling, shapeless night, emphatic  
voices prattle and buzz. They argue politics,  
monogamy; urge her to texture-coat her home  
or consider laser eye surgery; discuss fundamentalism,  
and whether the Washington area sniper is a terrorist  
or simply another deranged citizen. Blessed be  
the radio with its chorus of vigilant souls who refuse  
to let silence engulf our widow, and so, in  
their own way, practice a doctrine of constant  
love. Cajoled all night, she's never truly  
alone.

### *Ribs*

She returns to food only slowly. At first she gags  
down a few ounces of soup at her daughter's  
insistence. As the days pass, her enjoyment  
in eating gradually reawakens, like sensation  
prickling back into a sleeping limb. Tonight  
our widow is having pork ribs, slathered  
in hot sauce made from chiles, catsup, cloves  
and honey. As she eats, the dogs under the table  
nuzzle her legs. The word "marrow" is stuck  
in her head. It keeps repeating like the chorus  
of a song, in time to her chewing. *You  
were my plasma, sugarpie, my branching capillaries.  
Baby, sweet baby, you were my marrow.*