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Waiting for Pierre photo by Sallie Miller

Why "Widoe"

by AnnMarie Ginella

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It's no longer a question of why I am a widoe. I understand that now. It's why I spell widoe differently.

Peter was alone in a hospital bed when his blood clotted in his lungs and he was helpless to death. He had become ill with flu two weeks earlier. For years I believed he wasn't supposed to die. A vital, fifty-year old entrepreneur, who played ragtime rhythms on his baby-grand like he played rugby - charismatically and with divine playfulness, we didn't figure that death was on Peter's team or in

his band. Like a fervent dog with a bone, I held on to the belief that Peter died because of medical mistakes. Then one day I woke up saying, of course he died. He was supposed to. An angel hadn't appeared whispering answers to me in the mist, and yet there I was saying he was supposed to die because he did.

When I saw Peter, no breath from his chest, gown open, mouth agape, I became scarce of breath too. Wait, don't leave without me, I can't do this without you. The "this" being the-everything we were doing safely as a couple - raising boys, building a home from a hundred- year-old church, scraping by sometimes, living large others; lots of good loving in-between. Let me die too, I screamed in my head, as the hospital room remained silent. A widow? Peter's widow? Take me too. I'm a young woman, his girl, his lover, and mother of our boys. I am held safely in the illusion that Peter's arms are wrapped warmly around me. He would never leave me. He completes me, I say. Welcome to the past tense, sharp voices scream from unknown places, you were a girl; you're a widow now.

Then give me a widow's story I know. Someone who has done this before me, someone who can do it with me. Whistler's mother appeared, widow or not, in a rocking chair, back and forth rocking, without hope. I am not that tired, old woman. Jacqueline Kennedy. A pillbox hat, streaked mascara, bloodied suit. Not me. I'm not famous or glamorous or rich. I'm thirty-six, two months ago; it's the end of a millennium. We're raising a crop of boys together: Colby, in college already; Anton, a redheaded teen; and Zavier, only three. Our love child, we called him. And baby makes four, whispers the unknown son in my womb, who surprises me as a purple dot on a pink wand, three weeks after his had father slipped away in the night.

Yoko Ono, a widow. Again, famous, a rock star, artist, not me. Not a girl, not safe, too much room, too fast. I can't be a widow. Wait. Wives are widows. And I was not Peter's wife. I had worn off-white lace and he wore vintage tails on our wedding day as we stood, under gothic-arched stained glass, in the sanctuary of our home. Two hundred of our friends crowded the creaky, nave floor to witness our "union." It was nine years into our love affair, when we four - Peter, Annie, Colby and Anton - proclaimed ourselves a family. Our wedding celebration was as custom designed as our reconstructed churchhouse. God was shining upon us in our churchhouse of love, we believed, just not dressed in robes asking for paperwork and prayers.

I loved Peter to the bone, right down to his sweet marrow in-between, but I

never thought of myself as his wife. I was perfectly content where I was nestled, somewhere in-between love of his life and girl who spins his world. I knew they were names from a language that doesn't adequately define love. His wife, his girlfriend, his mistress, his lover, his partner; they were all his-someone. I wanted a new language to define our merger of skin, blood and checkbooks. I didn't call Peter my husband. When I introduced him I simply said, this is Peter. It wasn't hard to see by the way his electric-blue eyes charged me that he was a bulb of my light. Meet AnnMarie, he'd say, kind of low-down and beaming, his hand barely touching the tip of my tailbone, at the valley of my moon.

In the language of post-life however, there is no box to check for being his-someone. Widow comes from dowager, says my lawyer. It wasn't long ago that a woman couldn't own property unless she inherited it in her husband's death. Of-course, she was expected to turn it over to her next husband, in her next marriage. A widow was a dowager with a dowry, he adds. You know, land, a house, a chest at the foot of the bed. Look at it this way; you've got a home, albeit a church. That old place has always reminded me of the hull of a big wooden ship. How is the church anyway?

Why are we still wearing the archaic veils of a dowager when widows can own homes without death as the co-signer, I ask. It's the law, he says, it's the way widow is written.

No weeping willow of a widow for me, I said, as I masqueraded my heart, which felt like it had been thrown into a meat grinder, and chopped into ground-up grief. I wasn't Peter's official wife in life; I didn't want to be his widow in death. I would defy death by welcoming life, birthing our fourth son at home, in two hours, in front of the wood stove. I named my smiling baby boy his dead father's name. Carrying the flaming torch of Peter, I formed a non-profit, made a film, and raised money to develop a rugby field in his name. I caught myself calling Peter, my former "husband," more than once, and I felt like I was betraying the spirit in me that had chosen not to be his wife. I was a girl mourning the death of a man I loved, who had become invisible. I had become more officially linked to him in his death than I had been in his life.

Further down the widow's walk, it is painfully evident that there is no sweet marrow in-between the bones of a ghost. My hunger for Peter, for a love that once breathed warm, living air, on the back of my neck, was leaving us empty-bellied. I had created the vaporous, yet hailed, father, and phantom husband, in

our dreams, in the boys' bedtime stories, and in our songs, but there was nothing to chew on except my own emptiness, my own fear of being alone, my own mythology about a man making a woman safe and complete, regardless of what they call each other. I had been wearing the widow's tiara with all its grace and strength and in doing so I made an absent father the hero of our stories, the center of our home. One Halloween, the boys and I were making pumpkin pie from sweet, sugar-pie pumpkins which we had grown all summer in our garden and I asked Zavi what his favorite kind of pie was. He didn't want to answer until I told him what his daddy's favorite pie had been.

The widow's hood I had been wearing clearly fit no better than a corset would under my yoga clothes but I had squeezed into it. My widow was somewhere in-between a tiara and the black hood of a Goth, but neither wardrobe was my cloth of choice. I resigned as director of "For Pete's Sake," the non-profit in Peter's name, and started living in my own name. Slowly, I loosened the bindings of my widow's costume, and quietly, in the middle of the night, I wrote poetry about a widow who wears thong underwear under her boyish pants, climbing forts and ladders. I whittled away a master's degree, which I had started six years before. I go on a date with sexy Signore Amore in a city of poetry, where dark-skinned, goateed, men smoke love on the back seat of a motorcycle. But dating doesn't fit with me, a mama of three growing boys at home. After four months I knew I was tempting a fragile ice of the-everything being too much, too heavy, too thin.

I was stretched somewhere in-between a mama singing the tender lullabies of Tom Waits, in all-nighters of washing a cloth of tears across fevered boys' brows and mama, wanting to walk away from the churchhouse, leaving her boys on the front steps with signs around their necks saying I had disappeared in the direction of Thailand, where my babies wouldn't tug, or pull, or push into my brittle, porcelain skin. Instead of a love affair with a poet I vow to make love to myself with yoga in the morning and Haitian dance at night. I don't need a man to make this family whole, I say, hoping, like I did when I was a girl saying my prayers, if I said it enough, I'd start to believe it.

Looking for widows with whom I can share my journey, my ear is tuned for the widow in literature, the media, and the flesh. I read about the widow's hood, a mourning hood affixed to a heavy cloak, worn by widows, sometimes called their peak. I imagine a hood of widows instead, a neighborhood of widows, with laughing children and community gardens and wooden playgrounds. I look for

the widow's peak in strangers' hairlines, and ask them if they are widows. I read about war widows in the newspaper, and I cry as I imagine the war widows about whom I don't read in the newspaper. Some one recommends "The Widow Wore Black." It's a comedy, he chuckle, and I wonder whether death can ever be funny again. I watch the "Widow of Saint-Pierre," about a guillotine being shipped to a French colony on the coast of Newfoundland, and I learn that in French, widow is slang for guillotine.

In a painted purple dresser of GG's, my favorite grandmother, I find the widows I seek. Called Frana by others, GG was a first-born daughter of turn-of-the-century Slovenian emigrants who were seeking golden dreams from Alaska to California. GG was a delicate girl, an artist, who was raised in rambunctious Truckee, an ice mining, train-stop-of-a-town in the snowy Sierras. GG was a painter I never saw paint. My mother says she was mean when she drank. She remembers her with a paintbrush in one hand and a glass of gin in the other.

By the time I knew GG, she didn't paint, she wasn't mean, and she didn't drink gin. Nor did she speak to me about her years of being a painter. Her cubism-influenced paintings are portraits of angled and stone-faced characters in bold-colored, Dali-esque landscapes. GG was widowed in her sixtieth year. After she died, I found most of GG's paintings, boxed away neatly, in her garage, where they sat, hidden, quiet and still.

I sort through GG's purple dresser drawer, uncovering her handbags that smell like Rosenberg's department store, her single stockings that have lost their garter belts and her crystal earrings that are absent of a mate. Under her once-crisp linens, I find the embroidered hankies of all my widowed grandmamas.

I see the stitches of a sturdy old woman proudly sweeping the city sidewalks in front of her home and I find great-grandmama, Nonie Tereza, Italian born, San Franciscan buried. Grandmother Mary's stitch shows an Irish Catholic rigidity with a temper. I too have thin Irish skin, its transparency stretched across the veins of a too-quick anger, that reveals all my sins insides - my sinsides, I call them. There are hankies with the stitches of black-lace bootstraps where I see Mama Til, from Berlin. Mama Til was widowed in a freezing Truckee winter with a three-year-old boy to keep warm. Funny, I was widowed with a three-year-old boy too, I think. They say I have Tillie's thick hair. The hair I've always called "too thick" and "too coarse." Maybe also cursed, I wonder. It's the hair I've always tried to contain within buns and braids. The hair that cradles my neck, and

warms my shoulders, when I sleep.

Reverently, I take my grandmamas' hankies from GG's drawer, and tuck them into the back pockets of my low-rise jeans. I'm feeling both, the heaviness, and the comfort of belonging to my family of women. I realize that I'm packing a family of widow's weight in my slim hips. The hips of my own story mirrors my widowed grand mamas' stories and their grand mamas' stories. I had simply stepped into a long walk of widows.

I decide to move from the churchhouse; a complete house now, five bedrooms, three bathrooms, new stained glass in the arched windows, a blooming garden in what was once a parking lot. Despite all the work, post-Peter, to make it a reflection of the boys and me, the churchhouse still feels like it's locked in a time when I was coupled. The upkeep, the bills, the memories, are all too big for a woman with slight hips packing heavy hankies. Against the pleas and protests of the little ones who can't imagine moving from the cocoon where they were born, I list our home in the booming North Bay real estate market, where houses are selling over asking price.

The churchhouse doesn't sell. You'd have to be musician to appreciate the acoustics, an artist to appreciate the wall space, wealthy to afford the gas bills in the winter, they say. I lease it to a screenwriter, who wants to fill its hull with an artists' community. I watch the tenants move in, two by two - palettes, canvases, massage tables, musical instruments, dishes, books, clothes – all filing in like Noah's animals to his ark. I feel relieved to be embarking from the vessel that has held my grief. I feel like I've cut off my heavy hair.

Aside from the boys pounding out cacophonies with grimy, careless hands, Peter's piano had been un-played in the years since his death and I post it on Craig's List with the rest of the big stuff I am selling out of our nave. Shorly after Peter died, I had named the piano, Mathilde. I used to throw my body, my hair across Mathilde's ebony shine and together we'd long for his familiar fingers to dance upon our keys, to play our songs. I would polish Mathilde's smooth and silent surface in hopes of summoning Peter's playful Dixie and scat-time Rag. He used to beckon me to sit beside him and be his girl, on his piano bench, as he crooned his Berliner-scratch-blues. That's okay, I'd say, play some more and I'll just keep on dancing over here. I could feel the steam of his eyes as I teased my hips and saucy legs in a bedtime shuffle, plugged into the neon-blue of his eyes. I knew my rhythm fueled his syncopation, and likewise.

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Magda, a Russian bombshell, with full lips, tight blue jeans and spiked heels, says she's a concert pianist, says she played for the Prince of Wales once, says she wants to buy the piano. She arrives with a cashier's check from her tele-communications business, paying twice what Peter had paid, seventeen years before. Ebony Mathilde, with her dark shine, leaves our altar, to be played by buxom, blond Magda, and I shudder as I watch the piano movers close her hood. When Mathilde exhales her last churchhouse breath, she sounds like a coffin being shut. All the years, I thought I'd been peeling away the layers of Peter from my skin, yet his coffin had remained open, in our sanctuary.

I take GG's paintings from the walls of my home. The sad, serious eyes of her portraits will no longer stare at me, saying nothing. The rental I am moving into is one-third the size of the churchhouse. I will no longer have vast space. But I don't want big anymore. I realize it was Peter who desired the grand hall and large kitchen for music and entertaining. I want small and simple and cozy. I meet with my writing professor to discuss my master's thesis. I suggest to my professor, who reminds me a little bit of GG, that I could write the story of my children's dead father. I tell her a little bit about Peter, the bon vivant, who dies suddenly and disappears, his music silenced. Or, I suggest, I could write the stories of my grandmothers, my widowed kin, whose widowhood I have discovered in my own widow's hood. I fear the faces of GG will disappear, I say, that their stories will never be told. I tell her about GG's paintings, the hankies, and the handbags. What about your own story, she asks. It's too personal, I say, wrapping my heavy cloak around me.

I begin writing my grandmothers' stories and the text confronts me. First you honor the ghost father, now the dead mother, it says. What about you, the woman in-between, who lives and breathes, providing love and food for your children, doing this-everything you fear so much? Pull those old hankerchiefs from your hip-hugging pockets, the text says. You have a story that is not Peter's and not your grandmothers'. You are a widow in a new century. First, you need to learn to embroider them and then start carrying your own damn hankies, it says.

I start to write myself into and apart from my lineage. GG is a modern widow, Mama Til, a pioneering widow and I, the first postmodern widow, in my family of women. I live in a country, in a time, where women run corporations, same-sex couples adopt children, domestic partners are entitled to working benefits and single mothers keep rediscovering that it has always been the women and

children together, around the hearth, while the warriors and hunters went off to war and hunt.

One day, at my keyboard - my postmodern hearth - the fingers of my left hand start a scuffle over territory and the spelling of words. Because my middle finger is faster, louder and more experienced than my delicate ring finger, middle finger finds the e before ring finger reaches the w and the w falls off the end of widow into the land of q and a, where it will, no doubt, make question words. I see the aftermath of the battle on my screen and suddenly, widoe has softened, transformed, is smiling even, a Mona Lisa kind of smile._Widoe. I smile. Why not? A doe, stag-less, with freckled fawns at my side. Sometimes, more often than I admit, I am frightened by the headlights of my life; afraid I won't be able to pay my bills, that my debt will grow with the hole in my belly and I'll never fill it. I fear that I'm not only scaring but also scarring my boys with the anger that comes bursting out of me, anger I thought I had healed and I am always surprised by. I'm scared, I'm surprised, sometimes squelched, but my squinty blue eyes are nothing like the dark, round eyes of a doe.

I call my thesis, A Postmodern Widoe. Rather than deny my widow's hood, I cut my cloak from a cloth that belongs to all widows, tailoring it to me. My widoe wears an e, the way another widow wears high-necked black, another wears a white mourning veil, another, a heavy shroud, or a severe peak. I tell my professor that the e is the proper way to make the o long and widow feminine. Spare me the grammar lesson, she says. Okay then, widow is written in an archaic language that doesn't define me. The e loosens the patriarchal bindings of widow, with origins of being his property. I know I'm privileged to live in a progressively fertile valley where women, at least overtly, are not regarded as property. The hole in my belly is obesity alongside the widow of India who is cast out to the streets to beg with her children and who is denied her property, her children's' inheritance, which had been stolen by her husband's family.

Widoe is somewhere in-between mammal and woman, I say to my professor. Birth unites women in a family of mothers welcoming life into hopeful arms. Death unites women in a family of widoes releasing life from helpless arms. My widoe has the freedom to walk to a Haitian dance class, down the street from my home, thirsting for rejuvenation, from the live drumming, the sweat, and the colorful skirts. I don't live the Haitian widoe's day-to-day hunger and poverty.

Peter's death was his last gift to me. When the curtains closed on his life, they

slowly opened again, and there, on the stage we had once occupied, at the altar I hadn't seen, was a story of my own. I'm swimming like a mermaid, in deeper, bluer waters than I ever imagined exploring. I cherish the tiny moments where I get a taste of the sweet marrow in-between, knowing that death will swoop in at the tiny moment it is supposed to, and I will have no choice, but to disappear. The thin ice is ever fragile, but it is also sparkles in the sun. Red raspberries, tart apples and bitter greens grow among the boys and beans in the garden. My contained braids jump joyously around my face in a Congolese rhythm, knowing they will be freed again, at night, as I lay my head upon my soft pillow. There are heated moments when the boys and I are all going at each other like caged wildcats at the zoo, and quiet moments where Zavi, the budding pre-teen, shows me how to embroider a cross-stitch, and lucky Pierre, a happy boy with freckles and a toothless grin, teaches me the slip-knot.

We have released the ghost father and phantom husband to the skies; a good place for mythology and dreams. Our home is mother-centered. We are a mama, four boys - two, so grown now, they're men; two reaching up like the summer beans on our backyard poles. A cherished daughter-in-law has joined the family table; soon there will be babies; our bellies are full. I wear the low-cut cords, high heels, working boots, flip-flops, thongs, skirts and aprons too. I rock back and forth, like Whistler's mother, in my rocking chair, but my waiting is not without hope. From my little, rented home, west of the churchhouse, in a little town, I can hear church bells ring everyday, at noon and again at supper time. The churchhouse I moved from lacked the melodic resonance of bells in its belfry.

I let the morning glory grow wild in my garden, there to greet the sun as it peeks out from the east, for another day. I know the high beams will surprise me from around the corner. They shine to dare me as I walk my walk. They beam to dart a crucible across the road, to see whether I'm paying attention. They shine to show me how bright light can be. I imagine a love will come around the corner someday, breathing warm, living air, on my neck. But I know that it's not his love or his living air that makes me, a widoe, complete.

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AnnMarie Ginella earned a B.A. in French Literature at Sonoma State University in 1991, and became a teacher at Cardinal Newman High School in Santa Rosa, CA., where she taught World and American Literature, World History and French. In 1997, she was suddenly widowed with three sons and one suprise son, on the way. She went back to school in 1999, for a M.A. in English, with an emphasis in Creative Writing and graduated in 2001. Her thesis is entitled, *A Postmodern Widoe*.

AnnMarie began her work with non-profits in 1986, as the Business Manager of the Marquee Theatre, in Santa Rosa, CA. She has served as Board Secretary for the Sonoma County Repertory Theatre, For Pete's Sake, and Summerfield Waldorf School and Farm. Additionally, AnnMarie served as Board President, and Executive Director of For Pete's Sake, the non-profit formed in memory of Peter Eierman. From 2002-2005, AnnMarie worked in Development at Summerfield Waldorf School and Farm, where she assisted in grant writing, program development, fundraising and outreach. In 2005, AnnMarie founded WidowSpeak, which incorporates her experience as a widow with her commitment to work that matters in the world, and her passion for reading and writing stories.

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