

# BECOMING A WIDOW...JUST AS I WAS ABOUT TO GET DIVORCED

By *Robin Eileen Bernstein*


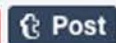
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What it felt like to stand at the deathbed of my almost-ex-husband, with his girlfriend at my side.

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Illustration by Kyle Smart

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I was visiting my mom at her assisted living facility the other day, and chatting with

the woman at the front desk. We talked about the traffic and my long drive home and I let it drop that I might want to sell my car. I sensed she might want to buy.

“It’s in great shape. Low mileage,” I said. “My late husband bought it new five years ago.” As soon as I uttered the words, I braced myself for what I knew was coming next. It would have nothing to do with cars.

“Oh, no!” she said, her eyes now wide and glistening. “I’m so sorry! How awful to lose your husband so young!” She shook her head. “So hard...” Her voice trailed off.

Her reaction – a sympathetic, well-meaning expression of compassion, pity and shock – was typical. When you’re widowed at 52, you get used to it. But no matter how often I hear it, it still makes me uncomfortable.

That’s because I’m not a typical widow. I was widowed on a technicality; my husband died while we were getting divorced.

Being widowed while divorcing means sneaking into the widow club through the back door, without paying the usual price of admission: raging soul-crushing grief. It means carrying a nagging sense of guilt for accepting sympathy that feels undeserved, and an almost obsessive need to confess that you’re not the “real” widow people assume you are.

### *Narratively*

Back during our courtship I had ignored my gut feeling that something wasn’t right between Mark and me. But soon after our honeymoon, when I bristled at his “my way or the highway” approach to life, I knew we needed a marriage counselor, stat. When that didn’t help, I found three more over the next decade. At Barnes & Noble, I stalked the self-help aisle for books to save our marriage, until the internet allowed me to stalk from the comfort of my home. Yet even as our relationship deteriorated, we connected in bed, and more than physically. For some reason at night he opened his heart to me. Maybe it was the mere act of being horizontal, but that’s when he softened and I felt loved, and that sustained us longer than I’d care to admit. Yet each morning with the predictability of sunrise, our problems returned with a thud. By the end, I’d turn away after sex so he wouldn’t see my tears. I couldn’t fix what was irretrievably broken.

When we finally parted ways, it came as a relief. Our kids, then fifteen and thirteen, weren't surprised. "What took you so long?" our daughter asked with no small dash of sarcasm. We hired divorce lawyers though it took a while before I was comfortable calling him "my ex." At first I coughed it out, a verbal Heimlich maneuver. I practiced, trying it on for size: "My ex?" "My ex." "My ex!" Technically he wasn't. There was no legal separation, just my insistence to remain amicable and settle out of court.

Reaching a settlement proved elusive and frustrating, but we did manage to remain amicable. He eventually moved in with his girlfriend Sharon, a pretty, petite single mom nearly my age, just a few years younger than Mark. "She's terrific," Mark told me. "You'll see." He was right. She was. I liked her.

When he had a heart attack on a humid Sunday evening in late July, two years into our split, it was Sharon who was with him. It was Sharon who called to tell me.

"He went into cardiac arrest," she said. He was comatose, the prognosis grim. While I was watching "True Blood" on HBO, she had been desperately performing CPR on the man who was technically still my husband.

"I'm at the hospital," she said. "Come quickly."

When the kids and I arrived, a bored-looking ER attendant escorted us into a small, empty waiting room. "You'll need to wait here," he said. "The doctor is talking to the family." He motioned to a set of closed double doors across the hall.

"But we *are* the family," I said.

He squinted at me, his brow knitted in confusion. "Who are you?"

"I'm his wife," I said. "And these are his kids."

The look on his face said "this can't be good" and we were ushered through those double doors.

"When we found out there was a wife *and* a girlfriend, we thought, 'oh no!'" an ICU nurse confided to me, only after they realized there was no reason to worry. Legally, as wife, I called the shots; I was Mark's healthcare proxy with the authority to carry out his living will. But I wasn't about to exclude Sharon. Over the next five days, accompanied by the whoosh-hiss of the respirator and the beep-beep of the heart monitor, when it became clear there was no hope, we – Sharon, Mark's brother, and I

– jointly decided to take a once vital 57-year-old man off life support. With his final breath, I went from almost-ex to widow.

There's no protocol for my kind of widowhood. So I created one. His funeral would feature eulogies from widow and girlfriend. His gravestone would read "Caring Husband" on one line, and "Beloved Companion" on another. We even shared the pain: she with dashed hopes and a broken heart, me with endless executor's paperwork and two grief-stricken children. I went from divorce attorney to estate attorney.

Language often fails those whose family ties don't fit into conventional boxes. Today, five years after Mark's death, I still hesitate before defining my relationship to him. Saying "my late husband," while technically true, feels like a lie. Say it often enough and you start to wonder if you were ever getting divorced in the first place.

Yet the truth – "We were separated when he died" – often comes across as too confessional. At best, it's awkward. I have a choice: tell or don't tell. More often than not, I do. I'm not sure why. But it makes me feel better.

Or maybe I'll simply call him my "late soon-to-be-ex." It's a mouthful, but at least it's accurate.



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