

My Marital Status

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Six years after the event, I still cannot say for sure whether I am divorced or widowed. The question comes up whenever I am filling out a form that wants to know my marital status. All the other questions I can answer in seconds, but this one — which asks that I check *single, married, separated, divorced, or widowed* — always stumps me. I'll pause there at the dentist's office, insurance company, or bank, and, while the clock ticks and other people's children scamper at my feet, I'll reflect on what it really means to be married.

The event I refer to is the death of the woman who used to be my wife. Wanda was not my wife when she died in December 2001 at the age of forty-two. Not legally, anyway. She and I had met in the summer of 1980, married in the summer of 1984,

and divorced in the summer of 1994. Before we'd gotten married, I'd made it clear to Wanda that I did not want children, and she'd told me that she could accept this. Yet, throughout our years together, it seemed she never put her longing to rest. I watched her study the infants our friends and family brought into the world, as if silently hoping I would change my mind. I didn't. I couldn't see the sense in my becoming a parent and said so. Wanda's mother, with her affable proddings, would ask me why I'd married her daughter if we weren't going to have children. That, she would say, did not make sense to her.

The discontent Wanda and I felt about each other's intractable positions eventually spread into the rest of our marriage and soured it. What Wanda's mother kept saying began to

make sense to me: why stay married if I wasn't going to give Wanda the child she wanted? I was forty; Wanda was thirty-four — still plenty of time for her to have a child with someone else. I talked to Wanda about it, we put ourselves through a year of psychotherapy, and finally the two of us sadly agreed that things just weren't working out.

After we'd split, our lives suddenly took far different turns, as if we'd been spring-loaded to take off in new directions. I began studying Buddhist meditation; went on retreats in Nepal, Thailand, and here in the States; and found myself at the feet of dozens of spiritual sages who invariably spoke of the impermanence of everything. I knew about impermanence, having ended a marriage that was supposed to last as long as we both would live. But somehow hearing it spoken by teachers I considered wise gave me solace. I also put myself through Union Theological Seminary in New York City and earned a master's in divinity.

Meanwhile Wanda launched herself into physical pursuits, becoming a luminary in the local contradance, zydeco, and swing-dance community — a scene the two of us had never set foot in when we'd been together. She occasionally invited me to dances at a local parish hall or rec center near our homes in upstate New York. Sometimes, when I missed her, I'd show up. I'd pick her out of the crowd and wave, and she'd scoot over and guide me onto the floor, where I'd hobble along under her patient instruction as some of her suitors looked on. I can keep in step to rock-and-roll, but to this music I was like a rusty engine that's reluctant to turn over. Wanda and I would laugh at how clumsy I was. Then I'd watch her dance with another man, the two of them seeming to glide across the floor.

The remorse I'd felt about initiating the divorce diminished when I saw Wanda enjoying life on her own. From time to time we'd talk on the phone and trade stories about our latest romantic escapades. It turned out she and I were better friends than we'd been spouses: happier, more candid with each other, and less prone to bickering.

I had not seen Wanda for several months when she phoned me in April 2001 to tell me she was having surgery to remove a large mass in her abdomen. As I penciled in the date on my calendar, she told me not to worry, said it was nothing. And off she went with her latest beau to a Cajun-music festival in New Orleans.

I have always liked Wanda's family, and they have always liked me. Even after the divorce, I was invited to holiday dinners, birthday picnics, and Christmas services at their church. Wanda was Chinese American: her father had emigrated from Beijing and her mother from Shanghai in the 1940s, both fleeing the communist takeover. They'd met in New York City, married, and moved to suburban New Jersey, where I met Wanda while working at a newspaper. I was a young reporter, and she was an intern in the paper's graphic-design department. A middle-class, Connecticut-raised WASP, I was charmed by Wanda's Asian beauty. Although she and her two siblings were as American as I was, her parents were still very Chinese, and their culture seemed exotic to me. Her mother

spoke with an accent I found hard to understand. Her father showed me sawtooth-edged black-and-white photos of the house where he'd grown up: a palatial estate in Beijing that had been confiscated by the communist regime and turned into a barracks for the People's Liberation Army. Wanda and her family seemed less tormented by the guilt, worry, and conflict that droned on in my family and friends, and this held a certain allure for me.

On the day of Wanda's operation I joined her mother, father, older sister Frieda, and brother-in-law Peter at the hospital. Wanda maintained her silly, often droll sense of humor throughout the pre-op. As the nurses rolled her on the gurney into the operating room, she held up the hand not tethered to the IV and cranked it side to side, like Queen Elizabeth waving from her Rolls Royce. Several hours later we met with her surgeon. We learned that a softball-sized pelvic mass had been removed in a total hysterectomy. He appeared disconcerted; the tissue, he said, would be sent to a lab for a biopsy, and the results would take a couple of days. Wanda would remain in the hospital to recover.

One evening a few days later I walked into her room after a stressful day at the office. Wanda was on the phone, snapping at the hospital-switchboard operator — unusual behavior for her; Wanda was usually courteous to a fault. And she was glaring at the foot of her bed. The way I figured it, she had just been sliced open and was in pain. Of course she was irritable. Seeing me, she hung up and started to cry.

"I don't have good news," she said.

Whatever had bothered me at work that day fell away, and I rushed to her bedside and cupped one of her hands in mine. I imagined some infection, or perhaps she would need another operation.

"What is it?" I asked, caressing her long black hair.

"It's cancer," she said.

Ovarian. And it was serious.

I laid my head on Wanda's lap and sobbed.

In the years we'd been apart, Wanda and I had each had several lovers who'd come and gone, but neither of us had remarried, nor were we seeing anyone at that time. This gave us the freedom to be with each other without competing love interests at the margins. I spent hours with Wanda in the cramped living room of her apartment, which adjoined her parents' house, an hour's drive from mine in New York State, where they had moved a few years before. A hospital bed her maternal grandmother had used in her final years was set up there. I also accompanied Wanda and her sister on trips to Boston's Dana-Farber / Brigham and Women's Cancer Center, where Wanda was treated with punishing, nauseating rounds of chemotherapy that kept her down for days. It was an aggressive regimen. She had a rare and virulent form of cancer — clear-cell — and it was at stage IV, which meant that the cancer had gotten into the liver. Stage IV can be treated but is terminal; few live beyond five years. In the aftermath of these treatments, Wanda would sometimes call me to gripe about the pain or for comfort, often weeping.

I tried to appear strong in the face of Wanda's weakening condition and, to some extent, my own. I visited her, ran errands for her, and sometimes cooked for her while the earth tilted us into summer and then fall. The September 11 attacks left Wanda and her sister stranded in Oregon, where they had spent a week learning *qigong* from a renowned Chinese master, hoping this ancient healing practice might help Wanda get well again. A few days later, when Peter and I drove to the Newark airport to pick them up, we could see, across the New Jersey tidal marshes, clouds of smoke from the still-smoldering remains of the Twin Towers. With all the death and dying in the air, I was elated to see Wanda alive at the gate. We hugged, and for a moment I had the idea that everything was going to be fine.

For most of October, Wanda's condition remained relatively stable; her oncologist seemed encouraged by her response to the experimental brew of chemotherapy he'd prescribed, and perhaps to the *qigong*. Then one November morning Frieda called me.

"Something bad is happening with Wanda," she said, her voice distant from the poor cellphone connection. Peter had gone into the apartment to get Wanda, she said, and found her lying upstairs on a stripped bed in a spare bedroom, disoriented and barely cognizant. An ambulance was on the way.

"Jim's here!" exclaimed Frieda when I parted the baby blue privacy curtain at the emergency room. Wanda, stretched out on a gurney, looked at me. There was no spark of recognition. Her head stayed tilted to the left, and her eyes were wide, as if she were shocked by the condition in which she found herself. The sole movement in that tight space was Wanda's left arm, which slowly rose and fell like a machine, as if to push back from her face the thick black hair she'd once had. Doctors say hearing is the last of the senses to go, and I wondered if Wanda was listening as her family and I discussed her condition. I passed my hand lightly over her head to let her know I was there.

Wanda was admitted for observation and a battery of tests to determine what, exactly, had gone wrong with her brain. I spent my days and nights at the hospital while a handful of office colleagues took on a good portion of my work. I had barely noticed the changing of the seasons that year, and when I did finally notice, it was through the sealed, grimy window of Wanda's fourth-floor room. The tops of the trees had gone bare, and the people on the broken sidewalks had thick clothes on, their shoulders hunched against the cold and puffs of steam coming from their mouths. I wanted so much to be out in the world; I wanted Wanda to be out there, too — on the street, making plans, living life.

Wanda had a room to herself, and the night nurses let me stay past visiting hours. With the very real possibility of death hovering near, the world outside the window became increasingly irrelevant. The lines between day and night, the known and the unknowable, were beginning to blur. Even the fact of our divorce seemed to get erased.

I tried to get some rest in two tangerine-colored chairs I'd pushed together, but I never could sleep sitting up. To distract

myself, I slipped on the headphones of the portable cassette player we'd brought for Wanda. (We'd thought music might comfort her.) I pushed the PLAY button. Van Morrison's "Carrying a Torch" came on.

Wanda had made the tape, labeled "Mellow Music," several weeks earlier. She'd put the Van Morrison song on it, she'd told me, because it reminded her of us. Sometimes we'd joked that when we got old and feeble, we'd shack up together in a nursing home. Now, delirious from insomnia, I gazed at Wanda's wasted form in the pale gray light and listened to Van Morrison beseech his lost lover to "reconnect and move further into the light." It was as if everything under me — the earth itself — had been pulled away, and I was plunging through a dark space, nowhere to go but down. I felt that by not wanting children and initiating the breakup of our marriage, I'd committed a heinous crime, and now I was being punished. Selfish bastard that I was, I'd stayed involved with Wanda even after we'd split up, perhaps thwarting her chances to get remarried and have the child she wanted. I'd read that not having children can increase a woman's risk of ovarian cancer — so that, too, was my fault.

Early the next morning, I was awakened by the sound of Wanda gurgling on vomit. After being admitted, she'd been given a morphine patch to ease her pain. I'd voiced a mild objection, having been told that, because she was "narcotic naive" — Wanda hardly even took aspirin — morphine could make her nauseous. Now I ran down the waxed hallway to tell the nurse that "my wife" was throwing up. It was the first time I had called Wanda "my wife" since we'd separated. I wanted the nurse to take my plea for help seriously, and somehow I thought that using the word *wife* would do the trick. But there was another, less calculated, reason: as I had vowed nearly twenty years before, I still cherished Wanda as if she were my wife, in sickness and in health.

The nurse came and wiped green bile from Wanda's chin, and, despite my misgivings, I agreed Wanda should keep the morphine patch on. A few minutes later, though, just as I thought Wanda had drifted back to sleep, she started heaving again. I called the nurse back, and this time I took it upon myself to peel the morphine patch off Wanda's pale, blue-veined chest.

"She doesn't want morphine," I snarled, as if it were the nurse's fault it had been put there in the first place.

I'd been awake barely a half-hour, and already the day had taken its toll on me. Left alone in the room, I climbed into bed with Wanda. I thought that if she couldn't see or hear me, perhaps she could feel me. The rubber-coated mattress crinkled under my weight. Her emaciated form lay still as I curled against her, fetal-like, and nuzzled her neck. Wanda fell back to sleep, and after a few moments so did I. It was the first time we'd been in the same bed together in eight years, and in a strange way it felt like home. When her family doctor showed up later that morning, I was startled awake and felt intruded upon, as if he'd barged into our bedroom.

(end of excerpt)