

## *I Claim the Title of Widow*

By Diane Silver

**F**ive days after my life partner, Patty, and I were told that her breast cancer had spread to her brain and the bones of her back, snow fell. That morning we had an appointment with Patty's oncologist to talk about treatment options. Patty was the first one up, bolting from the warmth of the quilt to the window. She gasped. "It snowed."

"Is it deep?" I asked.

"No, but it's beautiful."

I climbed out of bed into the cool air, padded behind her, and looked out onto white-coated roofs and tree branches. I hugged her from behind, putting my arms around her solid waist. I laid my head on her shoulder. She leaned back against me. I thought, now is all that matters. I am the luckiest person in the world.

Three months later, Patty was dead.

At age 41, after seven short years in the best relationship of my life, I became a widow—a lesbian widow. In many ways I am like many other widows: a newly single parent, raising our son, Tony, a first grader, by myself. I have questions of the estate to settle. I have a house, a yard, groceries, laundry, a car—all suddenly, painfully, to take care of by myself. Now I have only my income to pay the bills, and I am not at all certain it will be enough.

I feel as if I've put on a coat that everyone assures me is mine, yet it doesn't look or feel like any style I would ever choose. This garment of widowhood is ugly and ill-fitting anyway, but because I am a lesbian it has even more rips and stains. An insurance company, for example, suggested that I was a con artist who took care of Patty to gain control of her property. The obituary writer objected to listing me first among the survivors—that placement was reserved for spouses. Besides, the writer argued, how could he be sure that Patty and I really were "companions"? When I had to get certified copies of Patty's death certificate to file her income taxes, the clerk in the Bureau of Vital Statistics asked: "Can you prove your relationship?"

With the help of my attorney, friends, and Patty's mother and brother, I won those fights. But I am tired of fighting. Patty and I could not legally marry, and in a world that refuses to see the truth of our family, I honestly don't know what to say to the people who keep asking me to prove it.

How do I prove the first time Tony woke up in the middle

of the night with a fever? As first-time parents, Patty and I panicked. We were heading out the door to the emergency room when it occurred to us we should first look in Dr. Spock. Patty held Tony and sang softly, while I leafed furiously through the book. In the end, cool cloths and baby-strength Tylenol were enough to cure the crisis. After Tony was asleep again, Patty and I drank coffee and laughed.

How do I prove that we would fall asleep every night holding hands? That we delighted in doing nothing more exotic than sitting on the couch together, watching TV? How do I prove all the afternoons that Patty, Tony, and I played baseball with a plastic ball and bat on our front lawn?

She laughed at my jokes. I marveled at her warmth, her ability to honor and listen to anyone, even the Christian fundamentalist in the neighborhood who wondered out loud whether Patty was going to hell.

Near the end, the tumor had taken so much of her brain that her thoughts became nonsensical. One day she said: "They tell me this is our house, but I don't know it. Can you draw me a map?" I drew a detailed map including our street,

our neighbors' houses, and even our furniture. She looked at it once and threw it down. "This makes no sense," she said.

Two nights before she died, the house was quiet. Our son was asleep upstairs. I felt as if I had not been close to Patty for centuries. How could I be intimate with a woman I couldn't talk to? But that night I stopped trying to talk and lay down on a hospital cot we had crammed into the room next to her bed. To reach her, I had to lie with my head toward the foot of the bed, position myself by the headboard, prop my feet on the wall, and stretch my arm

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through the cold metal railing that kept her from falling. She grabbed my hand hard. Her hand was soft and warm and solid. I closed my eyes. She felt no different than she had that snowy morning when we still thought we had options. Unexpectedly, I fell asleep. I slept soundly for hours.

Since Patty died, one group of heterosexuals has not questioned my right to call myself a widow. In fact, they were the first people to give me that label. Their emissary was a woman who called me a few weeks after Patty died.

"Did you know that I was also widowed young?" my acquaintance asked. "Let's talk." **Ms**

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