

The Widower

Eric W Jepson

Four years had passed since Mary had died; Torrance still wasn't comfortable dating and yet here he was, getting married. Five years with Mary may have been too short, but it was still a lifetime's worth of love, and for Torrance it was enough.

He sighed and looked out the side window at his reflection. The bags under his eyes were there, as usual, and he still had that hunted look. You know your demons are close to the surface when even you can see them reflected back from your car window at four in the morning.

The car behind him honked, and Torrance jerked alert and drove through the intersection. What was a car doing behind him at four in the morning anyway? The other lane was even empty. Jerk.

The car was the first Torrance had seen this morning and could be his last. He'd been delivering early morning papers for over three years now. Just a way to fill the hours; and with general conference or the scriptures playing, it sometimes even felt like time well spent.

Time well spent. There hadn't been much of that the last few years. Still on the same rung of the corporate ladder as when she died. Didn't bother him much—hard to care about accounts receivable when eternity was painfully close and too, too far away. Without Mary, full-time burger-building could've about covered Torrance's expenses and ambitions.

He rolled down his window, punched in the newspaper code, and the gates swung open. Bavarian Fields was one of the swanky, look-at-me-I'm-wealthy gated communities that Mary had always been attracted to. Heaven knows why. She liked the ones too ritzy to have a community pool. No, you want a pool, you get one of your own. Torrance grew up too rural to look kindly at that. Besides, all the Fields-dwellers insisted on front-porch delivery, no driveway

drops here. And they didn't tip. Not that anyone tipped much—the days of the cute paperboy at your door once a month were long gone—but at Christmas a dozen people or so would give a few bucks to the now anonymous Paper Delivery Person.

Most likely, Torrance figured as he ran up the long driveways, he would have to give up the route when he got married again. Probably have to get more serious at work, too. Start acting like a grownup again. He returned to his car after the last drop on Mansborough Avenue and glanced at the large, empty front lawns. He could save so much time just cutting across them. Set off a dozen alarms too.

Bitterness. Sing a hymn.

It was funny, Torrance considered, that he had never felt directly bitter about Mary's death, yet every other one of life's irritants made him hateful and angry. Ridiculous, really. Thirty-three and a bitter old man. Why in the world did he think he would make a good husband? Why in the world was he getting married?

It wasn't because he wanted to, that was for sure. It wasn't as if he stayed up nights praying, "Oh Lord, send me a wife!" A wife was the last thing Torrance wanted. Pity and papers were plenty.

When Mary had died, Torrance had been bishop for all of three months. They released him right afterwards, calling his older, more experienced first counselor to take his place. A necessity, he supposed, but a terrible thing. He'd just gotten into the schedule of busy-busy-busy, worry-worry-worry about other people's problems, then there he was: busy-free, with nothing to think about but his own tragedy. Alone—no company except his pain—exactly like hell.

No. With hell, that's it. At least Torrance knew some day he and Mary would be together again, raising their twin daughters—one aged two hours, the other three days—but in the meantime, the house was empty, and macaroni and cheese with hot dogs was still macaroni and cheese. Add barbeque sauce or béchamel? Macaroni and cheese. Pork and beans is pork and beans. Cold Spaghetti-Os. For nine weeks. Then, without planning to, he found himself in the produce section, and he bought a tomato.

Torrance stopped at the end of the last street in Bavarian Fields, grabbed nine papers, got out of his car, and paused. A few weeks ago, some punk kids had thrown a rock at him here. The

back fender was still dented. His insurance would cover the repairs, but, you know, he didn't care. There had been a lot of damage that night in the Fields—uprooted flower gardens, spray paint, toilet paper. The police had come to ask him if he'd seen anything, and he showed them his car and gave a vague description. They'd made him fill out some forms. They never caught them. No surprise. Spoiled Fields kids, Torrance figured. Always getting away with something.

Torrance laughed at himself as he reached the end of the block, tossed his last paper, and ran back to the car. Why was he such a nut in the mornings? Maybe when he was married again, he could start sleeping through the nights and give up throwing papers. Maybe his four-to-six self-flagellation routine could finally die and he could sleep till seven. Wouldn't that be something?

Torrance had only been able to convince himself to see his replacement, the new bishop, once, six months late, but once had seemed enough. He still did papers and didn't care much for work; but to some degree, he had started living again. He read when he was home; he ate real food sometimes; he bought a dartboard. Things were better.

Torrance left the Fields and drove onto Kelvin Street, named after someone no longer remembered. Who knew if it even was someone's name? He stopped long enough to fold another thirty papers or so. Tuesday's paper was always the thinnest, so it was no problem to fold them with his right hand as he drove with his left, taking rubber bands off the wipers control, but he still threw faster than he could fold, and so the thirty-some-odd buildup. And then he was off, slaloming down Kelvin, jerking from one side to the other, tossing the papers onto left-side driveways, hucking them over the car to those on the right. He had to look like a maniac, he knew, but at 4:47 in the morning? There's no one to see. If a maniac is driving and no one sees him, is a maniac driving? Torrance laughed.

Reverting to bachelorhood had been lunar in its emptiness—especially in a house he had once shared—but he adapted. The hardest was learning to think selfishly again. If he wanted to watch *Cool Hand Luke* again (for the thousandth time), there was

no reason not to give in to the impulse. Who was it going to hurt? Or bother? Nobody. "Sometimes nothin' can be a real cool hand."

But sleeping alone was hard. Or bothering to make a real meal. Or checking the mail when there was no one to get excited at the pizza ads. Or enjoying the temple. Oh he still went—usually twice a month—but he usually ended up crying, and for all the wrong reasons. Once, one of the sisters asked him if he would like to do sealings, and he started bawling right there in the lobby.

On the year anniversary of her passing, he held a mopefest, inviting only her stuffed squirrel. It lasted most of the week, until he suddenly thought to ask himself why he had a religion if he wasn't going to use it. It was a good question. Even now, as he pulled into the Presbyterians' parking lot to turn around, it was still a good question. So he had started thinking about it. Not just eternal families, but God's love and the Atonement and "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam" and everything. It helped. And then, a year and six weeks later, the bishop asked to see him again. Torrance held his emotional breath, but the meeting was short and he left with a calling. Sunday School teacher. Finally.

He would teach every other week, alternating with someone named Amelia Draper—how long had she been in the ward? And why had she got a calling before him? Torrance laughed as he remembered the sense of injustice. He turned the car into an alleyway he'd found the first year of papers, cut behind Marco Polo Johnson Elementary School, and onto the last part of his route. The narrow streets ended the need to swing from side to side; just drive down the road, throw the rest of the papers.

He had dived into the lessons—New Testament that year. He reread the Gospels seven times and traced Paul across the continents and could quote the best-known parables. Even by the end of his first week, he almost felt better. Even at work he heard himself laughing without cynicism. He started catching the occasional name; he went and saw a movie with an old friend. He even went to dinner with Amelia once, although he still wasn't sure how that had happened.

An image of Mary giggling flashed across his eyes. Torrance threw a paper straight into a bush. He yanked on the emergency brake and ran out to put it on the drive.

Her girliness was what had driven him crazy. It was weird—he

had hated girly girls in high school with their send-me-flowers and their heart-dotted i's and their everything pink. Maddening. And then, suddenly, on his twenty-third birthday, he met the girliest of girls; and before the month was out, he was in love. He remade himself in her image. Anything she imagined, he made happen. Then they were engaged and that was right. At the sealing, her eyes and hair were accompanied by angels in the light. And then they two—

Torrance shook his head. He had a tendency to pangloss their five-year marriage. Sure they were happy, most of the time. Most of the time they laughed and cuddled, but he'd also spent a week's worth of nights on the couch. Once, about six months in, he was yelling; and when he paused for breath, he heard the wind chime she kept over the sink humming. He stopped. The chimes stopped. But his words hung in the air. He apologized. He said he would never yell again at the woman he loved. And he hadn't.

She had this way of shaking her head. She would smile and shake her head, then look up at him from under her brow. And he would want to kiss her; she would laugh and run into another room, and he would chase her, following her girlish giggle around until they ended somewhere, wrapped up in each other's arms, smiling at each other and sharing each other's breath. They would just lie there like that. For hours sometimes. Some mornings, Torrance would reach out to hit the snooze, then realize his alarm clock was in another room and he was lying on the floor of the spare bedroom with the picnic blanket wrapped around them. Around him and his wife. Mary. Then he would open his eyes, and look at her head on his chest, her fingers twitching. She was smiling. Always smiling. Sometimes, as he drove to work, he would thank God for Mary's smile. That he had it to come home to. Her smile alone made life worthwhile. Maybe it was cheesy, but it was true.

Torrance felt a tear fall on his arm. He was still holding the parking brake. How long had he been sitting there? He reoriented himself and drove on, throwing papers.

* * *

Torrance got in at 6:18—four minutes later than average. He had taken today off to do wedding stuff, but Amelia wouldn't be

over until 8:00. Time enough to shower and shave and make breakfast. But first, the trash.

The first time Amelia had stopped by the house—to drop off a book by Elder Maxwell he had wanted for a lesson on the day of Pentecost—Torrance had just piled all the month's trash by the front door, ready to be taken out. Amelia's first impression: him in gloves, heavy winter coat, and Bermuda shorts with tons of trash everywhere, including a tied stack of mac&cheese boxes. One of those best-ever moments.

He didn't want to take the book because he had mayonnaise smeared on his gloves (from a jar he had broken while opening the door), so he invited her in so she could set it somewhere. Fortunately, the front room was relatively clean. Or tidy, rather—the thick layer of dust suggested the real reason for the tidiness: disuse. She blew off the coffee table before setting the book down.

"Sorry about the mess—I'm expecting Oscar. Green guy. You might know him." It was a bizarre thing to say, but it got a smile. Amelia's smile was different from Mary's. He didn't want to say it wasn't girly, because what did that mean? But it wasn't. Calling it more grown up seemed even worse. But she had a nice smile, and he watched it as she turned to leave.

He had smiled himself, that night, remembering it.

The next morning, he berated himself as an adulterer. He threw papers into the gutter and nearly hit two parked cars.

How could he ever look at a woman again? It didn't make sense, no matter what he read or heard or thought. He could get comfortable with the notion of moving on from about 10:00 A.M. to bedtime, but part of him still felt disloyal. After all, temple marriage is eternal marriage. Mary might be gone, but she was still his wife. Flesh of his flesh. Except that her flesh invariably brought thoughts of worms and centipedes and horrible fungus. Once, Torrance had thought he would throw up over his desk.

How could he, a married man, date? How?

So he didn't. Almost. There was that dinner with Amelia. And some group things. And then more stuff with Amelia. It got to a rhythm eventually: Amelia over to play Yahtzee or something as she told stories of Tolstoy or Manhattan or the Peace Corps; guilt as he delivered the papers. Sometimes he wondered if he was diagnosably bipolar.

The air was cool, but not cold. Torrance set the lid back on the trash can. Wouldn't be long now before the sun was up this time of day. He glanced to the side of the house. The bulbs Mary had planted were already peeking up.

Amelia loved the tulips. Her favorite flower, she said. Mary's flowers, Amelia's favorite. How was that? Torrance closed the door and went to the bathroom for his shower.

There was a memory; Torrance tried to grasp at it as he got into the shower. How did it go? Mary had been a funny combination of vibrant and shy when they first got married. She liked showing off for him but was so embarrassed in the bathroom that she made him put a slidebolt on the door so he couldn't be tempted to find a way in.

Torrance rinsed his hair, the shampoo sliding over his eyes like it did every single, stupid morning, when the memory arrived. He'd had shampoo in his eyes then, too. He had heard the world's most hesitant voice ask if she could wash his back. He was so surprised he opened his eyes, which hurt, so he had to rinse them but then he accidentally inhaled some water and started coughing and Mary was hitting him on the back, then she slipped and he caught her and she pulled the shower curtain down on them and next he knew they were both sitting on the floor of the tub laughing hilariously. Finally, he pushed the curtain off; she climbed into his lap and gave him a kiss.

"Yes," he said, "you can wash my back anytime."

* * *

Sometimes Torrance would hear himself thinking Amelia was everything Mary wasn't. It made his body tense, fists ready to punch through walls. Mary was wonderful, he would remind himself. Mary was perfect.

Amelia was totally different. She was so much taller and struck him as stockbrokerish sometimes, whatever that meant. She could be deadly serious, then joke about a fish named Timmy, and end with a verse from Deuteronomy. She was so—so herself. For Halloween, she darkened her hair and became Amelia Bedelia. She took Torrance to his first dance in six years. She also brought an evening's worth of Amelia Bedelia gags. "Let's cut a

rug," she said as Torrance tried to slip back to the punch bowl. And she took a 6x6-inch square of carpet and some scissors from the pockets of her frumpy maid's uniform and cut it up, there on the dance floor. He laughed and reached out for her. Before accepting his hand, she stuck a piece of carpet in his breast pocket, then he took her across the floor. That night, he took the carpet from his pocket and looked at it. He smelled it. He put it under his mattress.

The next day, he accused himself of sharing his bed and shoved the carpet into the trash. That night, he dug it out and placed it on the mantel, above the unused fireplace, under a dead clock. Where it stayed.

Mary had loved the fireplace. She liked to snuggle up to him in front of it, on her big, fake polar bear skin. She liked to make hot chocolate and not drink it. She made paper marshmallows, blowing between the folds to inflate them, and burned them at the ends of coat hangers. But for four years now it had been a black and empty cavity, a symbol of lost life. But next winter, he knew, next winter . . .

He had an hour to make breakfast. That's a long time for breakfast prep. Only fourteen seconds for Honey Smacks. But he had done some shopping for this morning. Fresh salsa, sour cream, hashbrowns. He emptied the fridge and considered the spoils. Now it just had to come together.

Torrance had basically stopped cooking after the honeymoon. Mary loved cooking; and even if she knew she wasn't that good, she certainly kept her enthusiasm. Although once, suddenly frustrated, she turned on her half-dozen fallen soufflés, mocking her from their ramekins, and viciously stabbed them with a handy spatula, splashing their doughy guts across the kitchen. Raspberries everywhere. She had a maniacal, wild-animal look, her hair clumped with the blood of berries. She held the dripping spatula aloft. She was frightening. He couldn't stop laughing.

No soufflés on the menu today. He instead had something vaguely Mexican in mind. Amelia liked her food hot, so his collection of bright red sauces had multiplied over the last year, and now he knew which were best for eggs and which with fish. A talent like the one for hot sauce can lie latent for years until suddenly ta da! a hot sauce girl comes into your life. Who knew?

Mary had liked French stuff. Sauces and onion soups. Her tastes in food had been the first thing he had told Amelia about her. It was strange. It was fun talking about Mary's tendency to spread peanut butter on zucchini bread, but it also felt distinctly irreligious. Like chatting about temple ceremonies down at the corner market. Mary's life was private and sacred. And his. For him.

But once he started, he couldn't stop. He told Amelia about her tics and her jokes and her fuzzy stockings and the way she joked about her mother. He told her about the soufflés and the paper marshmallows, and he even told her about Mary's smile. Sometimes he got too nostalgic and no doubt dreamy-eyed. But Amelia never seemed to mind. She seemed to understand. She would smile at the stories. She even smiled at the right places. She was smiling at Mary.

In pioneer times, Torrance had read, the first wife had to approve of any sister wives. But Mary wasn't there to approve of Amelia. When he prayed about marrying Amelia, he also prayed to know Mary's opinion. But did Mary have one? Was she up on things? She had to be, right? He's her husband!

Is she jealous, he wondered. Is she resentful? Does she look at Amelia as a man-stealing interloper? What?

"Hey, you."

Torrance jumped. "Oh! Hi!" He turned around to look at her. He hoped the hunted look was gone. "Jeez, you're quiet. I gotta start locking that door."

She shook her head and frowned. "Jeez, yourself. It's almost eight, Torry. And I see you're still in your sunrise state of vampiric gloom." She bared her teeth at him, hissed, and leaned against the table, eyebrows raised.

"Not true." Torrance shook his head. "The sun's up, the vampire's turned to dust, and here I am. Just me. Your friendly neighborhood Torrance." He lifted his arms to demonstrate his humanity and tried to laugh.

"Right. Well I'm glad to hear it. Smells good."

"Oh? What does vampire dust smell like?"

"The food, numbskull."

Torrance laughed a real laugh and turned back to the stove. "Thanks. I'm out of corn tortillas so we're stuck with flour."

"That's fine."

"So you say, but I know you better than that."

"And I know you well enough to know the vampire's not dead yet. So what gives?"

He shrugged and then, to his surprise, his mouth started talking—and he watched his fears crawl toward Amelia, as if she were their judge and master: "I'm already married, Amelia," they said. "I am! Why should you have to be someone's second? You deserve more than half a husband, more than some needy, mopey, bigamous—" He waved a hand at the window above the sink. "You deserve more than—"

"More than—"

"More than me."

He caught his breath. Thought for a moment he was done. Then: "How do you . . . feel about Mary? I mean really, Amelia. How do you really feel about her?"

Amelia pursed her lips. She pulled up one of the kitchen chairs and sat down. Her trenchcoat fell open, one white button on her black blouse catching the sun. She rested her elbows on her spread knees, and ran her hands through her hair.

"Well, we can't tell the bishop you're a bigamist, you know." She looked up at him and shook her head. "That's not allowed." She leaned back and watched him return, embarrassed, to chopping green onions. "I don't know how I feel, honestly. It's weird."

She sighed and looked away. "I never knew her, you know. And I feel like I ought to be jealous when you talk about her, but I'm not. And I really ought to be jealous because she had you first. But I'm not." She looked back at him and he turned to face her. "Torry?"

"Yeah?"

"I know it's weird to say, but somehow it's true: I love her. I don't know why, I don't know how, but I do. I shouldn't— No. No, I guess maybe I should. It just seems . . . off, that's all."

She stood up and walked over to him, looked close into his face. "Torrance. I love you. But I love Mary, too. I'm okay knowing I'll share eternity with her. It's not my girlhood dream, no. But

there you are. I marry you. She already did. And that's okay." She stepped back and leaned against a cupboard.

Torrance checked the hashbrowns, stirred them. Just a little longer. Almost done. Amelia loves Mary. Maybe Mary loves Amelia too. Why not? He turned off the gas and listened as the sizzling slowed.

"I love her, too," he whispered.

He turned to Amelia, standing there in her long coat and worried face. He reached a hand to her.

She took it and stepped into him.

"And I love you."