

The Other Love of His Life

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My fiancé's first marriage ended in tragedy. Before we could be happy together, he had had to make peace with that. And so had I.

Before we were engaged, I woke up to his kisses on a warm morning in July and felt guilty. It was her birthday, and I was at her house. With her husband. In her bed. Her bookshelves were filled with the same books I had on mine: *The Cider House Rules*, *Beloved*, and *The Pilot's Wife*. She had been a literature professor. She had loved writing. She had loved reading. She had loved Scrabble. And now she was gone.

Brandon had been married for less than six months when his wife was killed in a car accident. When I met him two years later, he was still wearing his wedding ring but on his right hand. I assumed the ring was a symbol of his continued commitment to her. Not a sign that he was ready to build a life with someone new.

Beyond the ring, there were a million reasons why I should have passed Brandon by. I love books. He never reads. I live near the beach. He's seventy-four miles inland. I'm a health nut. He subsists on Buffalo wings and beer.

But there were bigger reasons for me to stay. We both loved racing toy penny cars in the mall, pretending we were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and singing Barry Manilow's "Copacabana" at the top of our lungs. He was loving, charming, and sweet—and he knew how to make me laugh from deep within my belly.

Plus, I was like her. And they were happy. I pored over her pictures trying to learn everything I could about the woman who came before me. She would always hold a place in Brandon's heart, so I needed to know who she was.

A chill came over me when I visited her memorial page and read through the online guest book: "No one could ever fill her shoes," someone had written. That launched me into my next search: "dating a widower." Every site I visited warned of men who disappear after a few months out of guilt; those who constantly draw comparisons to their late spouse; and those who live in the tragic state of "what if?" Brandon hadn't done any of those things. But then I read this: "If he has pictures of her on the walls, clothes of hers in the closet, and trinkets of their life together on display, he is not ready."

Brandon insisted he wanted to move on, that she was dead and he was not. He didn't trigger any of the red flags I had read about. About a month into the relationship, the ring came off. Pictures were tucked away and replaced. Slowly, her clothes began to disappear from the closet.

Yet I still grappled with the feeling that I might never measure up to what he had lost. In his mind, she will always be thirty-three and beautiful. Me? I'll get gray hair, wrinkled skin, and flabby thighs. What's more, their relationship will remain perfect, frozen forever in newlywed bliss. In their six short months together, they hadn't weathered the storms

that come with age and time: sleepless nights caring for newborns, arguments over money, in-law drama.

As I fell more deeply in love, more questions came. If he had to pick one of us, whom would he choose? After we die, will he want to be buried next to her or me? Will we spend eternity as a trio?

But the most pressing question came on the morning of July 12: Do I go with him to visit her at the cemetery?

At first, I thought I didn't belong there, that she would want to spend her birthday with her husband minus the new girlfriend. I felt guilty for living the life she was robbed of—that I was lucky because she wasn't.

But Brandon reassured me. "She would want me to find someone else," he said. "Someone who can make me as happy as she did."

So, we celebrated her birthday together—all three of us. Brandon and I arranged flowers and planted a mini balloon in the earth. "She's usually pretty quiet," he said, trying to get a laugh. The wind kicked up and the balloon began bobbing back and forth. "It looks like she's waving at us," I said. Secretly, I hoped she was letting me know she approved.

At that moment, I realized I didn't want to fill her shoes. I had my own. She and I had much in common, but we were also very different. I call Brandon out on things she might have let slide. She enjoyed shopping; I prefer wine tasting. She was a master quilter: I can't hem a pair of pants.

"I am a very lucky man," Brandon said, as he hugged me on the cemetery lawn.

I used to disagree. How could someone who lost his wife in an instant call himself "lucky"? But as we walked back to the car, I knew he was right. He has the love of two women.

Maybe I'm a hopeless romantic, but I like to believe the first one helped guide him to the second.

*This story first appeared in *Newsweek*.

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