

The Other Woman: What It's Like Marrying a Widowed Man

After a blissful courtship, Helyn Trickey Bradley married the man of her dreams. She loved his two daughters, his charming house—but could she love his dead first wife, too?

By Helyn Trickey Bradley



Photo: Courtesy of the Bradley Family

I have a laundry list of reasons for hating the blue recliner: It's lumpy; it's too big for the room; it's covered with scratches from a dog I never knew. It looks like it might've been peed on or accidentally left out in the rain. And it belonged to my husband's dead wife, Karen.

Over and over again, I turn it to face the rest of the room, but because of a slight slope in the floor, the chair stubbornly swivels to face a bookcase that holds a framed photo of Karen sitting in the rumble seat of a Model A with her two young daughters, her blonde, chin-length hair shimmering in the sun. I dig up a photo of Gary and me taken after we got engaged, our arms woven tightly, our eyes wide like we're boarding the biggest ride at the fair. I place our photo on the bookcase, nudging it next to the picture of Karen and the girls. The frames touch, they are so close. Still, the chair nags at me. I want it gone.

"It's comfortable," Gary argues. "It's functional."

I tell him it looks like it belongs in a fraternity house.

I married Gary, a widower with two young daughters, after a whirlwind romance, the kind with such velocity that it confounds everyone but the two people at its center. We met online, then had dinner on a sticky night in August, when only mosquitoes and lovers linger on park benches. We broke most of the first date rules: He told me of the pain of losing his wife to cancer and the challenges of helping his daughters through their grief. I told him about the toxic decade-long relationship that had left me pessimistic about finding lasting love. By midnight, we'd both admitted that we were open to getting married—him again and me for the first time. It felt like we were spinning through the universe, two shooting stars shivering with speed. The following month, Gary introduced me to his

daughters: Tonya, 12, energetic and twinkly eyed, and Lizzie, a 5-year-old with a honey-colored bob and a jack-o'-lantern smile. Three months later, we were engaged. Less than a year after our first date, I became, at 41, a first-time wife and mother of two. In so many ways it was a dream come true, and I wanted badly to believe that moving into the home Gary had shared with Karen would be as seamless and wonderful as falling in love with her husband had been. Loving Gary was easy. Loving Gary's daughters was easy. Loving Karen was not.

The house was saturated with her. When we made peppermint tea, we used Karen's kettle. When we baked pumpkin muffins, we used Karen's oven mitts. Mail addressed to her still came to the house. I'd hoped I would grow to treasure Karen's primary-colored Fiesta dishes, her wedding dress, pressed and hanging at the back of our closet, waiting for Tonya or Lizzie. Instead, I wondered what kind of woman would buy a gingham shower curtain and leave the walls in her home a numbing shade of Landlord White. I resented the recipe notes, penned in her no-frills handwriting, that dropped out of her vegetarian cookbooks. In my heart, I knew that it was irrational to envy a dead person, someone who would never watch her daughters sing solos in school plays or wave goodbye to them as they shuffled nervously out the front door on first dates. But I couldn't help it: I wanted to claw the ruffled valances she'd hung in the kitchen. I even started drinking my morning coffee without cream to delay confronting the photo of Karen and Tonya taped to the refrigerator.

Gary and I had dismissed the idea of selling the house; the economy was sagging, and real estate was not fetching the prices it once had. More important, we didn't want to move the girls from the only home they'd known so soon after losing their mother. And anyway, I liked the white cottage with the picket fence, snuggled in amid towering Douglas firs on a street where neighbors waved. I was sure that with a little paint and some new furniture, the house Karen and Gary had renovated could become my home, too.

So we painted. We bought a lovely sofa set and changed the shower curtains. We tore out the wood-burning stove in the living room in favor of a gas fireplace. I arranged my John Updike novels and volumes of Mary Oliver's poetry on the bookshelves. But the blue chair remained—and so, it seemed, did Karen's hold on my house.

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