

## Trick or Treat by Amber Polo

My spine pressed against the straight backed chair at the round oak kitchen table. Behind a child-sized Halloween witch's hat, I stared at my lover's wife. Marlene's glassy, dark-rimmed eyes stared back. Neither of us remembered a good night's rest.

She'd called my office that afternoon. "We have to talk."

"Yes." My reply was barely audible.

"My house. I'll call when I get my children in bed after Trick or Treat."

Halloween? Where had the two months since Robert's stroke gone? Surprised that I could sit in my swivel chair and perform the simple task of answering a phone, I welcomed action. Anything was better than doing nothing and feeling everything.

The smell of macaroni and cheese reminded me how far outside real life I lived. I pushed aside a red Superman cape, removed a pair of devil horns from beneath me, and waited.

"I'm not old, ugly, or stupid," Marlene began, her square chin high. She'd slipped out of a long black coat and stood straight and poised in black slacks and red sweater. I'd come willingly to her kitchen to listen to words that would hurt. I was not here to deny, justify, or explain.

No ordinary wife and mother, Marlene had begun work on a PhD and last summer took four of their five children to Connecticut and performed in summer stock. No, I never thought she was stupid, old, or ugly. I never wanted her life. Now, I wasn't sure I wanted mine.

She stopped in front of a refrigerator collage of photos, magnets, and scribbled notes, the diary of her active family. “I knew,” she said, recognized the look of interest on my face, and smiled. “Last April I was sure. I saw you with him at lunch.”

My mind flashed to the hotel restaurant. He always told me it was fine. He lunched with his other department heads, didn't he? I wanted to believe him—believe that no one noticed when we traveled to meetings together or saw those accidental touches. That day Marlene and her mother waved and detoured to our table. She'd smiled through polite introductions and looked as cool as I had learned to appear. So, she'd known since then. And said nothing.

Unable to be less than completely honest, I said, “It was Pittsburgh.”

She shook her head. “The night he called and said his car was locked in a parking lot?” She hadn't guessed the affair had begun at the state conference.

I nodded. It sounded so dumb now.

Marlene bent, picked up a tiny princess's tiara, and set it on the stairway up to the bedrooms where her children slept. She turned and tossed me a hurtful line, “Even his Korean mistress was taller than you.” Was this supposed to tell me I was not the only one? Not special? Instead, it reminded me that she and Robert never looked like a couple. Next to her tall, solid frame, he bounced like a leprechaun.

In my deepest pain, I wondered if our affair created the stress that caused his stroke. More likely, the years of drinking, smoking, and intense living had taken a huge toll on his forty-nine-year-old, Type A body.

Marlene sat. She and I were adults and unlikely allies. Robert could not make decisions for himself. It was her time to lay out the rules.

“The hospital staff must not know about the...” Her voice wavered at the word “affair.” “So clichéd,” she said with a laugh and a dismissive hand gesture. I smiled and something opened between us. Under other circumstances we could have been friends.

That moment passed and she continued, “If a hint of scandal gets back to the social worker, Kara will be sent back to that horrible Korean orphanage.” Robert loved his three sons and two adopted daughters. He’d introduced them to me at a party, but I was too nervous to keep their names straight.

She told me the entire university community knew. No one had spoken to me since Robert’s hospitalization. I appeared at work every day and maintained the charade that I was fine. Even the worst gossips didn’t pry for tidbits of information or ask why I looked like hell. Other times, locked in my apartment, unable to eat or sleep, I journaled—if raving and repeating words on paper could be called journaling.

Marlene narrowed her eyes and tossed her head theatrically. “I wonder if I would have called you—if he’d died,” she whispered *sotto voce*.

I believe she would have wanted to be the one.

Marlene decided that the sooner Robert’s rehabilitation began, the better his chance of recovery. His family—his children—would be crucial in supporting his therapy.

She told me again the top priority was to protect his children, then tossed out a flip comment about the cost of therapy for five traumatized kids. Unable to meet her eyes, I stared at a glass bowl heaped with candy corn, apples, and Tootsie Roll Pops.

Marlene began to pace, automatically straightening the kitchen. The silence felt more awkward than sarcastic words. She picked up a carving knife next to a half-

completed Jack-o-lantern and examined it like Lady Macbeth. “I didn’t love him. We married in our late twenties and we both wanted a family. He loved me. But I did not love him. We made a good life. I grew to love him—too late.” She sighed and tossed the knife into the sink.

I left. I do not remember getting into my car or driving home.

Months later, when he returned to work, I saw the sparkling eyes of the formerly vibrant man and my heart again wanted to reach out. Then I noticed he told only old stories. Later, I learned that Marlene had given Robert rules, too. He could stay in their home until he was well enough to go back to work, he would move out as soon as he could live alone, and then they would divorce.

I saw him alone one more time. I said a final goodbye with sincere sorrow. Gradually, over months, I accepted I’d loved a shallow and selfish man. I remembered him saying, “Be there for me. I’ll try to be there for you,” and I no longer thought it was a loving commitment.

My devastation at losing this man I loved burned down the walls I had lived behind all my life. At thirty-nine I experienced real feelings, from passion to grief, and at last began to move forward towards life.

Marlene became my secret role model as I creating a new life. A suffering wife and caring mother divorced a disabled man and made him leave his home and children months after facing death. I imagined her surrounded by sympathetic family and friends, yet she must have borne enormous guilt as she salvaged her life.

“I’m not good enough for you,” Robert told me so often. I hope he said those words often to his wife.