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My Husband's Wife

Written by Jane Corry

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JANE CORRY

my husband's wife



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This book is dedicated to my amazing second husband, Shaun. Never a dull moment! Not only do you make me laugh but you also give me space to write.

This dedication is also shared with my wonderful children, who inspire me every day.

Prologue

Flash of metal.

Thunder in my ears.

'This is the five o'clock news.'

The radio, chirping merrily from the pine dresser, laden with photographs (holidays, graduation, wedding); a pretty blue and pink plate; a quarter bottle of Jack Daniel's, partially hidden by a birthday card.

My head is killing me. My right wrist as well. The pain in my chest is scary. So, too, is the blood.

I slump to the floor, soothed by the cold of the black slate. And I shake.

Above me, on the wall, is a white house in Italy, studded with purple bougainvillea. A honeymoon memento.

Can a marriage end in murder? Even if it's already dead?

That painting will be the last thing I see. But in my mind, I am reliving my life.

So it's true what they say about dying. The past comes back to go with you.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

Tuesday 20 October 2015

The artist Ed Macdonald has been found stabbed to death in his home. It is thought that . . .

PART ONE

Fifteen years earlier

I

Lily

Late September 2000

'Nervous?' Ed asks.

He's pouring out his favourite breakfast cereal. Rice Krispies. Usually I like them too. (Crispy, without milk.) As a child, I was obsessed by the elfin-faced figures on the packet, and the magic hasn't quite left.

But today I don't have the stomach to eat anything.

'Nervous?' I repeat, fastening my pearl earrings in the little mirror next to the sink. Our flat is small. Compromises had to be made.

Of what? I almost add. Nervous of the first day of married life, perhaps. Proper married life in the first year of a brand-new century. Nervous because we should have taken more time to find a better flat instead of one in the wrong part of Clapham, with a drunk as a neighbour across the landing, where both bedroom and bathroom are so small that my one tube of Rimmel foundation (soft beige) and my two lipsticks (rose pink and ruby red) snuggle up next to the teaspoons in the cutlery drawer.

Or nervous about going back to work after our honeymoon in Italy? A week in Sicily, knocking back bottles of

Marsala, grilled sardines and slabs of pecorino cheese in a hotel paid for by Ed's grandmother.

Maybe I'm nervous about all these things.

Normally, I love my work. Until recently, I was in employment law, helping people – especially women – who had been unfairly sacked. Looking after the underdog. That's me. I nearly became a social worker like Dad, but, thanks to a determined careers teacher at school and, let's say, certain events in my life, here I am. A 25-year-old newly qualified solicitor on a minimum wage. Struggling to do up the button at the back of my navy-blue skirt. No one wears bright colours in a law office, apart from the secretaries. It sends out the wrong message – or so I was told when I started. Law can be a great career, but there are occasions when it seems ridiculously behind the times.

'We're moving you to Criminal,' my boss announced by way of a wedding gift. 'We think you'll be good at it.'

So now, on my first day back from our honeymoon, I'm preparing to go to prison. To see a man who's been accused of murder. I've never been inside a prison before. Never wanted to. It's an unknown world. One reserved for people who have done wrong. I'm the kind of person who goes straight back if someone has given me too much change in the newsagent when I buy my monthly copy of *Cosmo*.

Ed is doodling now. His head is bent slightly to the left as he sketches on a notepad next to his cereal. My husband is always drawing. It was one of the first things that attracted me to him. 'Advertising,' he said with a rueful shrug when I asked what he did. 'On the creative side. But I'm going to be a full-time artist one day. This is just temporary – to pay the bills.'

I liked that. A man who knew where he was going. But in a way I was wrong. When he's drawing or painting, Ed doesn't even know which planet he's on. Right now, he's forgotten he even asked me a question. But suddenly it's important for me to answer it.

'Nervous? No, I'm not nervous.'

There's a nod, but I'm not sure he's really heard me. When Ed's in the zone, the rest of the world doesn't matter. Not even my fib.

Why, I ask, as I take his left hand – the one with the shiny gold wedding ring – don't I really tell him how I feel? Why not confess that I feel sick and that I need to go to the loo even though I've only just been? Is it because I want to pretend that our week away from the world still exists in the 'now', instead of in the souvenirs we brought back, like the pretty blue and pink plate that Ed is now sketching in more detail?

Or is it because I'm trying to pretend I'm not terrified of what lies ahead this morning? A shiver passes down my spine as I spray duty-free Chanel No. 5 on the inside of both wrists. (A present from Ed, using another wedding-gift cheque.) Last month, a solicitor from a rival firm was stabbed in both lungs when he went to see a client in Wandsworth. It happens.

'Come on,' I say, anxiety sharpening my usually light voice. 'We're both going to be late.'

Reluctantly, he rises from the rickety chair which the former owner of our flat had left behind. He's a tall man, my new husband. Lanky, with an almost apologetic way of walking, as if he would really rather be somewhere else. As a child, apparently, his hair was as golden as mine is

today ('We knew you were a "Lily" the first time we saw you,' my mother has always said), but now it's sandy. And he has thick fingers that betray no hint of the artist he yearns to be.

We all need our dreams. Lilies are meant to be beautiful. Graceful. I look all right from the top bit up, thanks to my naturally blonde hair and what my now-deceased grandmother used to kindly call 'elegant swan neck'. But look below, and you'll find leftover puppy fat instead of a slender stem. No matter what I do, I'm stuck on the size 16 rail – and that's if I'm lucky. I know I shouldn't care. Ed says my shape is 'part of me'. He means it nicely. I think. But my weight niggles. Always has done.

On the way out, my eye falls on the stack of wedding cards propped up against Ed's record deck. Mr and Mrs E. Macdonald. The name seems so unfamiliar.

Mrs Ed Macdonald.

Lily Macdonald.

I've spent ages trying to perfect my signature, looping the 'y' through the 'M', but somehow it still doesn't seem quite right. The names don't go together that well. I hope it's not a bad sign.

Meanwhile, each card requires a thank-you letter to be sent by the end of the week. If my mother has taught me anything, it is to be polite.

One of the cards has a particularly 'look at me!' flamboyant scrawl, in turquoise ink. 'Davina was a girlfriend once,' Ed explained before she turned up at our engagement party. 'But now we're just friends.'

I think of Davina with her horsey laugh and artfully styled auburn locks that make her look like a pre-Raphaelite

model. Davina who works in Events, organizing parties to which all the 'nice girls' go. Davina who narrowed her violet eyes when we were introduced, as if wondering why Ed would bother with the too-tall, too-plump, tousle-haired image that I see in the mirror every day.

Can a man ever be just friends with a woman when the relationship is over?

I decide to leave my predecessor's letter until last. Ed married *me*, not her, I remind myself.

My new husband's warm hand now squeezes mine as if reading my need for reassurance. 'It will be all right, you know.'

For a minute, I wonder if he is referring to our marriage. Then I remember. My first criminal client. Joe Thomas.

'Thanks.' It's comforting that Ed isn't taken in by my earlier bravado. And worrying, too.

Together, we shut the front door, checking it twice because it's all so unfamiliar to us, and walk briskly down the ground-floor corridor leading out of our block of flats. As we do so, another door opens and a little girl with long, dark, glossy hair swinging in a ponytail comes out with her mother. I've seen them before, but when I said 'hello' , they didn't reply. Both have beautiful olive skin and walk with a grace that makes them appear to be floating.

We hit the sharp autumn air together. The four of us are heading in the same direction but mother and daughter are now slightly ahead because Ed is scribbling something in his sketchbook as we walk. The pair, I notice, seem like carbon copies of each other, except that the woman is wearing a too-short black skirt and the little girl – who's whining for something – is dressed in a

navy-blue school uniform. When we have children, I tell myself, we'll teach them not to whine.

I shiver as we approach the stop: the pale autumn sun is so different from the honeymoon heat. But it's the prospect of our separation that tightens my chest. After one week of togetherness, the thought of managing for eight hours without my new husband is almost scary.

I find this unnerving. Not so long ago, I was independent. Content with my own company. But from the minute that Ed and I first spoke at that party six months ago (just six months!), I've felt both strengthened and weakened at the same time.

We pause and I steel myself for the inevitable. My bus goes one way. His, the other. Ed is off to the advertising company where he spends his days coming up with slogans to make the public buy something it never intended to.

And I'm off to prison in my navy-blue skirt suit and suntan.

'It won't be so scary when you're there,' says my new husband – how I never thought I'd say that word! – before kissing me on the mouth. He tastes of Rice Krispies and that strong toothpaste of his which I still haven't got used to.

'I know,' I say before he peels off to the bus stop on the other side of the road, his eyes now on the oak tree on the corner as he takes in its colour and shape.

Two lies. Small white ones. Designed to make the other feel better.

But that's how some lies start. Small. Well meaning. Until they get too big to handle.