

The Last Year of Being Married

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Extract

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Leaning on the wrong shoulder

Café Nero. Liverpool Street Station. Three p.m. Watching all the bankers go by with their secretaries, or maybe their work colleagues. Wonder if one of them will be Paul. And *her*.

Waiting for Jane, thirty-six, buzzy, brilliant, beautiful, and ex-wife of Pierce. Always has a mobile in her hand. Pierce told Paul she even took calls while he was going down on her. Chief accountant at Malvern & Duff, merchant bank. Not a conventional banker's wife, either. Hence divorce a year before. She lost two stone, if I remember rightly. Pierce had to take a month's leave with a suspected nervous breakdown. She's met someone else. Getting married next year. Pierce was always meeting someone else, but probably won't ever again—get married, that is.

Paul and I got Pierce's side of the story. Never knew hers. But, knowing Pierce, hers is probably a more honest version. Perhaps will find out now. She's agreed to meet me between meetings. I've got fifteen minutes. I've briefed her already about Paul. About the affair. About the history. And about the divorce.

I'm early again. Sit and order a black coffee, waiting until Jane arrives.

She's on time, smiling, striding towards me, turning heads in her tight white cotton Paul Smith blouse, just—above-the-knee skirt and kitten heels. Legs up to armpits. Mobile in one hand. Purse in the other.

She hugs me, and looks me up and down a few times.

Jane—'Hello, Sarah. See you're feeling it, then? Can't eat anything?'

Sarah—'No. Bit like you were.'

Jane—'It will pass. You'll look back on this in two years' time and think, Hey, wish I could lose weight like that when I want to. You will put it back on; don't worry. But I think you should look healthier and be healthier for Ben. You've got to look after him, and to do that well you've got to look after yourself well. And, more importantly, be *seen* to be looking after yourself well.'

Sarah—'What do you mean—be *seen* to be looking after myself?'

Jane—'If it goes to court, you will need to show you're responsible enough to look after Ben. Fit mentally, financially *and* physically. Looking like someone who's just come out of a concentration camp is not a good look. The mother usually gets custody, but I know Paul, and he sees everything as a possession. It's not just *his* house and *his* money, but it's also *his* son. So he may fight for custody at some stage.'

Sarah—'Well, Ben *is* his son. But Ben is *my* son too.'

Jane—'Quite. But he doesn't see it like that, Sarah. And it's not his house or his money. It's your money and your house as well. Remember that. Because the court will remind him of that. The fact he suggested you leave the house makes me think he's done his research, but

you need to see a solicitor to give you all the details, Sarah. Try my solicitor. She's good.'

Sarah—'I don't want to divorce him, Jane. I love him.'

Jane—'Do you think you can salvage the marriage?'

Sarah—'Don't know. I've been strong for Ben.'

Jane—'Well, you have to make your own decision about that, Sarah. And you're going to hear this from a lot of people, but let me be the first to tell you. *You've got to move on.* For your sake. For Ben's sake. And for your own sanity.

'The only role of importance Paul has in your life now is to be a good father to Ben. He's not been a good husband. Well, he has in some ways. Not in others. And you're not faultless. But that's past. You must deal with the present and future. You can do something about those two.

'Bottom line—he's admitted he wants out. And, again, I know Paul. He's stubborn, and once on track he won't sway from his course. He must provide for you as carer of Ben, and for Ben's future. That simple. And by suggesting you leave the house it seems to me he wants to short-change you. You know what you're dealing with. It's understandable, but ruthless. I need a coffee. I'll get you a chocolate brownie.'

Jane goes to order coffee and calories while I sit, stunned by the thought Paul might try to take Ben away from me. It makes me feel physically sick.

Jane returns with coffee and no cake.

Jane—'Ran out of cakes. You would probably throw it up anyway.'

Sarah—'Do you think he will take Ben away from me?'

Jane—'He will think about it. But he won't succeed unless he can prove you're emotionally unstable and therefore unfit to care for Ben yourself. Of course, he

could try to *make* you emotionally unstable. Or lower your confidence to such a level you feel you can't look after Ben. Wouldn't put that past him, Sarah.'

I think I'm going to throw up. Jane continues.

'I'll be frank. I like Paul. I like both of you. But it made me very angry when you told me he suggested you move out of the house with Ben. That's underhanded. That's mean. That's a shitty thing to do. I don't like that. Expect a call from Felicity Shindley-Hinde. She's my solicitor. Dreadful name, wonderful lady. She did good for me, and may have a recommendation for you. She's an ace divorce lawyer and you'll need one. Because Paul's attitude to money is the same as Pierce's. He will ruthlessly protect every last penny of his salary. Paul considers the money in the bank to be *his* money.

'Felicity managed to squeeze £300,000 out of a marriage that lasted less than a year. Something unheard of in the industry. Pierce was happy as he had over three million in the bank, so a mere £300k was peanuts to him. But he didn't think of it that way at the time. And, from what I hear, crashed a few cars and a few parties for a few months. I didn't get my hands on the offshore funds, non-listed American stocks and miscellaneous works of art he bought for cash. I knew about them, of course, because I managed his books while we were married. But I didn't care. I wanted to keep on good terms with Pierce post-divorce.

'You see, Sarah, Pierce has a lovely, gentle side to him, and if I'd gone for everything—well, he would have hated me till the day he died. Anyway, I have enough. Money doesn't make you happy. Too much and it ultimately makes you greedy for more.'

Jane drinks her coffee in one. And stands to leave.

Jane—'I'll get Pierce to call you. He's always had a soft

spot for you and he may be able to reach Paul on an emotional level. He might be able to reason with Paul. It might not be too late.'

Sarah—'Thank you. Everything will be all right, won't it?'

Jane—'Yes, everything will be all right. But not immediately. You will go through denial, regret, anger, sadness, joy—the lot. It takes time. Sometimes years, sometimes decades. Some people—both men and women—never get over it.'

Jane's mobile rings.

Jane—'Sorry, Sarah—got to take this one. It's important. Buying a house.'

To phone...

Jane—Hi, there. Yes. Yes. No. Tell them no. Don't care what they say. Tell them no. Tell them that's the offer or we walk away. Tell them for every week they refuse the offer we will drop by £5k. We'll do that for four weeks and then walk away. Tell them to fuck off, then.'

Click.

Sarah—'You don't want the house, then?'

Jane—'Course I do. But don't want them to know that. All a game, Sarah, all a game. Bit like divorce, really. If you can't convince the opposition of your motives, confuse them. Got to go now, Sarah. Text Pierce. That's the best way to reach him these days. And expect a call from Felicity. She's good.'