Wedded Blitz

Tina Reilly

Prologue

NO MATTER HOW many times Jane dusted the mantelpiece, she always had to stop whenever she came to the photo. Matt, with his big wide grin and his tousled black hair, laughed out at her from the frame. It was the sort of photo that made noise. His black hair, the green grass of Phoenix Park and his red Man United jersey all produced a joyous clash of vibrant colours that made her smile. Jim had taken it – one of the few he'd ever taken of Matt. Jim was a good photographer with a great eye for a picture. She was glad he'd taken that one.

It had been a great day, she remembered. Jim had taken his camera out to the park to do some shots of greenery for an ad project he was working on. She and the kids had accompanied him. They'd pulled up in the park, tumbled out of the car and begun walking. Owen had taken his skateboard and was whizzing along in front of them. Matt ran alongside him for a bit, begging for a go, while Di snuggled up to her dad. She was a real Daddy's girl and had yet to discover her love of all things black. Jim had wrapped one arm around his daughter and the other around her. No, he'd put his hand into the back pocket of her jeans, she remembered. And she had put her hand into the back pocket of his. They'd walked along like that, hip to hip, him nuzzling the top of her head and turning her on something rotten.

Then Matt had wrestled the skateboard from a laughing Owen and had stood shakily on it. 'Don't', she'd called out, trying not to laugh, knowing he'd fall.

And he had.

Right onto the grass.

And snap! Jim had left her side and taken the picture. Then he'd snapped her. And he carried that one in his wallet.

Or at least he used to.

'Jane?'

She jumped. Guiltily put the picture back in its place, before turning around. Jim stood, framed in the doorway, his dark hair falling across his face. His eyes flicked to the photo and darted away again. He looked like Matt, she thought suddenly. The notion caused her to wince. 'Yeah?' She made her voice over-bright.

'Look,' Jim swallowed. Moved from one foot to the other. 'I've been thinking.'

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'Yeah?' A sort of dread began in the pit of her stomach. Jim was not one for thinking about things, as far as she knew. 'Thinking? About what?'

'Us.'

'Oh.'

'And, well,' Jim swallowed again. 'It's not working, is it?'

She didn't answer. Instead she felt her heart swell up inside her and her stomach gave a weird lurch.

'I think, and well, maybe it's for the best, I think I should move out.'

Move out? She stared at him. 'What?'

He met her gaze for the first time. 'D'you think that would be best?'

Best? Did she think it would be for the best? What kind of a stupid question was that? The memory of that day in the park was only one memory. There were so many more. Like the time they'd bought the house and christened every room. The birth of Di when he'd picked up the wrong baby in the nursery and brought it into her. The time he'd phoned her to tell her that he was coming home early so that they could 'get some decent sex in' before the kids came home from school, only to find he was talking to his mother-in-law, who informed him that she wasn't in the least attracted to him, though thanks for the offer. The time she'd cooked a birthday dinner for him and he'd got food poisoning. The funny times. The erotic times. The bloody wonderful times. And of course the sad times.

'Do I think it would be for the best?' she asked, her tone sarcastic. 'Is that a joke?'

'No.'

'So you actually want me to tell you if you moving out would be for the best?'

'Oh forget it!' He turned around.

'Just like you're trying to forget, is that it?' She was gratified to see his shoulders stiffen. 'There are some things you can't forget, Jim. Leaving is not going to change that!'

He turned around. His dark eyes looked hopelessly at her. 'It's because I can't forget that I'm leaving,' he said, and his voice rose too, though he didn't sound as aggressive as her. He never could. 'We had good times Jane, great times. That's why I'm going – we don't have that any more.'

'But if we tried, we could have.' She hated pleading with him, but this was the only man she'd ever loved.

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'We have tried,' he said flatly.

'I've tried, you mean,' she said. 'You haven't talked to me once. You've never told me what went on in your head that time when—'

'That doesn't matter!' He closed his eyes and bit his lip and when he looked at her again, she knew that no matter what she said, even if she told him that it wasn't for the best, he was still going to leave. But damn it, he wasn't going to take her dignity along with everything else.

'What about the kids?' she tried to hit him where it hurt most. 'What will they think?'

Jim bit his lip again. She used to love seeing him do that.

'I'll tell them – OK? They might be happier anyway.'

She didn't know what to say to that. She never knew what to say to Jim any more. He wasn't the same person that she used to know. She reckoned that he wasn't the person he used to think he was either.

'And where will you go?'

'Fred said he'd let me stay for a bit.'

Fred. Jesus.

She must have rolled her eyes because Jim said, a bit sharply, 'Yeah, well, I won't have much money, will I? I mean, I think we should keep the house for the kids' sake, don't you?'

'I dunno,' her tone was sarcastic. 'Do you think it would be for the best?'

'Jane. Stop.'

She bowed her head. 'Right,' she snapped. 'Let's keep the house.'

'Good.'

'If that's what you want.'

Jim winced. It wasn't what he wanted. Of course it wasn't. He wanted things to be the way they used to be. He wanted him and Jane to be happy. He wanted her respect again, but he'd lost that. He glanced briefly at the photo she'd been holding when he'd come into the room. His best shot ever. Bloody photo. Every time he looked at it – which wasn't often – it seemed to mock him. 'It's not what I want Jane,' he said. 'But, I guess it's just the way things are.'

She was about to tell him that the way things were was because they were acting the way they were, but it was too late. He'd turned his back and walked out.

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Their marriage was over.

1

Three months later

JANE PARKED HER car and grinned – twenty minutes to get to work had to be some kind of record. Since Jim had left, she was driving to work late in the morning, which meant that the traffic had eased. Patrick, her business partner, had insisted that as she was now a broken marriage statistic it was important for her to be there to see her kids off to school. Jane smiled, thinking that being in work was sometimes preferable to dealing with her daughter's sulks first thing in the morning.

Pulling her bag from the boot, she flicked on the car alarm and began the short walk to the salon. Fifteen years ago, her father had lent her the money to invest in a salon of her own. Jane had thrown her lot in with Patrick, a mate from hairdressing college. Together they'd slowly built up the business. She'd cut and Patrick had coloured. And then, when one stylist wasn't enough, they'd taken on Mir. Much to her mother's horror, however, they'd put Patrick's name over the door. Patrick Costelloe's sounded so much classier than Jane D'arcy's.

Jane hoisted her bag over her shoulder and sighed. It was going to be a quiet morning. They'd closed the salon to do interviews for a new trainee and a quiet morning was not what she was after. Cups of tea and meaningless chat would be the order of the day. But she was good at that. Hadn't she been doing it for the last four years of her marriage?

His back was killing him. That was Jim's first thought as he woke up. Sleeping on Fred's sofa bed was torture. Not only because the bed was lumpy and small, but because he had to share the room with a manic African Grey parrot that screeched 'Fuck' at least every half-hour. Fred was very proud of the parrot, claiming that it was a real conversation ice-breaker with girls. Jim knew he'd been out of it too long. Girls being fascinated with cursing birds was not something he could envisage.

'Sleep well?' Fred, fully clothed, and stinking of cologne, walked into the sitting room. 'I was going to wake you, but hey, you looked so peaceful there.'

Jim glanced at his watch. Christ! He jumped off the bed and picked up his clothes from the floor. His boss would freak at him being so late. As he shaved and washed he wondered if he'd be stuck with Fred for a long time. The thought chilled him.

It had been crap looking for a flat to rent. Prices everywhere were so high that he'd have had to take out a mortgage on the house just to afford a month's rent. And he

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definitely didn't want to share with a load of people he didn't know. It had been brilliant when Fred, a mate, had mentioned that he was stuck for someone to share his rent with. At the time, Jim was convinced that it had been heaven sent. He and Fred went back a long way, they got on great and Fred was decent enough, even if there was a major personality clash between him and Jane.

The thought of Jane made him feel a bit sick. He tried not to think of her too much these days. Thinking about her only made the pain worse. When he'd first left he'd thought about her all the time – the Jane of the early years: the warmth of her body beside his in bed, the way she whirled about the house in the morning getting the kids ready for school, the sound of her laugh. He'd loved her laugh. He'd loved her. He didn't miss the awkwardness of the last few years but God, he really missed just seeing her.

Fred rapped on the bathroom door. 'Listen Jimbo, I'm going!'

'OK.' Jim bit his lip. The whole idea of sharing with Fred didn't seem so brilliant now. For one thing, if he had to sleep on that sofa for much longer he'd be crippled by the time he was forty.

'I'll see you later,' Fred shouted through the door. 'I vote, right, that we have a few beers and make a plan of action – get you circulating in the world again. No point in being free if you're gonna mope like you've been doing – right?' Without waiting for an answer, he called out a 'bye' and a slam of the flat door followed.

Jim looked at himself in the small bathroom mirror. How the hell had it come to this? OK, it was nice not to have that awkwardness every time he tried to talk to his wife, but Jesus, he wondered if he'd ever get over her. She was the only woman he'd ever loved.

'FUUCCKK!' the parrot shrieked from the sitting room.

'Yeah. Fuck.' Jim laid his head against the cool of the glass. 'Fuck,' he said again.

2

MIRANDA, THE OTHER stylist, was on the phone when Jane walked into the coffee room of the salon. Miranda was sitting scrunched up in a chair with her back to the door. She spoke in a low threatening tone into the receiver. Jane smiled. It was kind of reassuring to know that she wasn't the only one with man problems. Mir's love life could have had a regular spot on Oprah. If there was a useless waster out there, Miranda would find him. Her latest fella was a musician. He was dead good apparently and his band was called The Condemned. They sang Beatles' numbers and stuff they wrote themselves. How Miranda did it, Jane hadn't a clue. The girl could have had anyone. Miranda was thirty-two, three years younger than Jane, but she looked like a girl in her early twenties. Her jet-black hair was cut short and tight, showing off her perfect oval face and wide brown eyes. Her clothes always had a

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label whether it was Levi or Calvin Klein, and no matter what she wore it always looked good on her.

Lately, Jane had envied Miranda's free and easy life. There were no kids, no mortgage and if her relationships broke up on a regular basis, at least it didn't impact on anyone else. Mir could still head out the following week and find some other loser, while Jane had spent the last couple of months see-sawing between a sort of grief that her marriage was over and relief that it was finally over. It was only when Jim left that she'd realised how her heart had broken a little bit every day at their inability to laugh and talk together. Every stilted word had been like a piece of glass cutting her open. She wondered if Jim felt that too.

Walking past Mir, Jane hung up her coat and began reviewing the letters from the job applicants. The first one was due in at ten-thirty.

'Bastard,' Miranda said loudly into the receiver. She sniffed a bit. 'No I won't!' Slamming down the phone she muttered 'Bastard' again.

'Trouble?' Jane looked up from one particularly badly spelt letter. In normal circumstances the letter would have been thrown in the bin, but these days, for some reason, trainees were very difficult to find. She had to interview anyone who was interested.

'You said it.' Miranda rooted around in her Gucci handbag and pulled out a packet of fags. 'D'you mind?' she asked.

'Just one, right?' Jane replied. 'And keep the window open.' The last thing Jane needed was a stylist grumping and biting the heads off all the applicants.

'That fecker,' Miranda pointed at the phone, 'stood me up last night.' She lit her fag with shaking fingers. Inhaling deeply, she blew a long stream of smoke towards the ceiling. 'He was meant to pick me up at eight and I waited in for him until after ten.'

'That's bad.' Jane braced herself for the details. Miranda shared her problems in the same way that Jesus had shared out loaves and fishes. Most days it was entertaining, and at least today it meant that she could keep her own problems on hold.

'You think that was bad!' Miranda exclaimed. She waved her cigarette around and ash fell everywhere. 'When he eventually showed up – at around eleven – he was totally locked and reeking of smoke.'

'I hope you told him where to go.'

'Fecker was swaying all over the place, like he was after stepping off the waltzer in Funderland or something. He could barely string a sentence together.' She paused and sighed dramatically. 'Well, I couldn't have him acting like that outside my apartment, sure I couldn't?'

'No. So you told him where to go?'

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'Yeah,' Miranda nodded. 'I told him to come in.' She flicked her cigarette in the general direction of the ashtray. More ash fell on the floor. Her face softened a bit. 'Aw Jane, even though he was tanked up he's as cute. He's got this little dimple right here,' she pointed to her left cheek, 'and when he smiles it goes in.'

'That's what dimples do all right,' Jane said, half-amused. 'So what did you do then?' She could guess the rest of this story.

They'd talked.

'Well, we talked for a bit. Straightened things out.'

They'd kissed.

'Had a bit of a snog.'

One thing had led to another.

'A bit of a shag.'

And then he'd pissed off, like they always did.

'Anyway, he fecked off this morning and never even said "goodbye" or "good morning" or anything.'

Jane tried to look as if she hadn't heard the story a million times before. 'So . . . what? He rang you just now to apologise?'

'No, I rang him to see if I could see him this evening,' Miranda bit her lip, 'but he says he's busy.'

'Oh, Jesus, Miranda.' Jane couldn't help it. The girl was hopeless.

Miranda shrugged. Gulped. Took another drag on her cigarette. 'Don't gimme the lecture, Jane. Don't tell me what I should have done.'

'I wasn't—'

'It's OK for you. Well,' Mir looked pained, as if she'd just put her size three stiletto in it, 'it was OK for you. You've done the great guy bit.'

Jane flinched. 'And look where that got me.' She

tried to keep her tone light, to bite down the hurt. She stared hard at one of the applications.

'Yeah, but at least you did it,' Mir made a face. 'I don't think I'll ever get a guy to love me the way Jim loved you.'

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'Loved being the operative word.'

'You have no idea what it's like out there now,' Mir went on, ignoring Jane's bitter comment. 'The whole scene is a fecking cattle mart. Everyone parades about like . . . I dunno . . . like big heifers hoping to get bought up by the highest bidder.'

Jane said nothing. When Miranda began equating dating to anything to do with animals, it was best to keep schtum.

'And when they pick you out they want some action, you know? No one buys a cow and gets milk in the local shop.' Miranda viciously stubbed out her fag.

'Jesus, Miranda, that's awful!'

'Awful world out there,' Miranda said wearily.

There was no hope for her, Jane thought. Every guy she was ever with had done the same thing to her. 'Will you shut up – you're like an auld wan.'

'I feel like an auld wan.'

'Come here and gimme a hand with these CVs.'

'What? All three of them?' Miranda snorted. She stood up and brushed the ash from her clothes. 'I wouldn't mind so much,' she said thoughtfully, 'only he was great in bed. Very considerate.'

'That was nice.'

'I betcha your Jim was like that. I betcha he cared about what you wanted.'

Jane flinched. Mir could be so insensitive at times – not that she meant to be.

'Well?' Miranda looked at her expectantly.

'Mir – I am not going to discuss my sex life with Jim with you.' He'd been great though. No, she corrected herself, they'd been great. Couldn't keep their hands off each other. And even though the last few years had been bad, and the sex had declined, it had still been explosive when it had happened. 'I'm not!' she said sharply as Mir poked her in the arm. She picked up the second CV. Coffee stains adorned it. Something that looked like jam had stuck to one corner. Her stomach did an involuntary roll.

'I betcha,' Miranda poked her again. 'I betcha Jim didn't do a Koala bear on you.'

'What?'

'You know; eats, shoots and leaves.'

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It took a second for the joke to register and when it did, Jane laughed. 'Where do you get them?' she giggled. 'You're disgusting.'

'Not as disgusting as that CV.'

The only person out of the three applicants to show for the interview was the owner of the revolting CV. By the time she turned up, Miranda had worked herself into an even more foul humour.

'You'd think they'd cancel, wouldn't you?' she said as Jane placed a cup of tea in front of her. 'I mean, it's only manners now, isn't it?'

'You're right, but there's not a lot we can do about it.'

'No one has manners any more. I mean, take that fecker last night – did he even thank me for the use of my bed? Did he?' She shook her head. 'Did he fuck! That's everyone these days—'

The doorbell rang and Jane went to answer it. Her head was going to explode if she had to listen to Miranda any longer.

There was a girl of about eighteen outside. She was dressed in what might have passed for an interview suit if it had been ironed: a blue skirt, blue jacket and red blouse. Dark brown tights and heavy shoes did nothing to add to the overall effect. The girl's hair was caught back in an untidy ponytail and she sported oversized glasses through which she peered anxiously at Jane.

'Hiya,' her voice was high and nervous. 'Am I in the right place? I'm looking for the "Patrick Costelloe Hair Saloon"?'

'That's us.' Despite her sinking heart, Jane managed a smile and pointed at the sign above the door. 'Come on in.'

The girl stepped through the doorway and looked around. 'I went to the place up the road, the sort of empty shop where there's loads of work going on, that's where I thought it was.'

'Well, you've found us now.' Jane tried to hide her dismay at the state of the girl behind a frazzled smile. 'Come this way.'

'Yes, yes I did, didn't I?' the girl giggled nervously. 'They said that they were Cutting Edge and that they were opening up next month. They said that you were down here.'

Jane froze. The girl banged into her and her glasses slid off her nose and on to the floor. 'What did you just say?' Jane hoped she'd heard wrongly. Her mouth was dry as she asked, 'Did you say Cutting Edge are moving in up the road?'

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'Uh-huh,' the girl located her specs and stood up. Nodding eagerly, she said, 'Cutting Edge is really the business, isn't it? It'll probably get you some customers too.' She looked around the place. 'Isn't it awful quiet?'

'What?' Jane could barely register what the kid was saying now. All she could see was the Cutting Edge hairdressing empire muscling in on her territory. A sort of slow sick feeling spread right through her.

'It's very quiet, isn't it?' the girl repeated. 'I mean, very, very quiet.'

'We're normally busy, it's just that we've closed for the morning to conduct the interviews.'

'Oh.' The girl gave another giggle. 'Ooohh, right. I just thought that . . . well . . . you were . . . well . . .' she paused, unsure. 'Oh, never mind.'

'This way.' Jane's heart had now sunk so far into her boots that she felt as if she was squishing it with every step that she took.

'Interview candidate here,' she announced to Miranda.

Miranda quickly stubbed out her fag and shoved her mirror back into her bag. She folded her hands in front of her on the desk and put on her serious face.

The girl gazed around the office before sliding into a seat. 'Hi,' she beamed. 'Sorry I'm late. I was waiting for the bus and didn't a car come and splash me and I had to go back home and dry myself with a hairdryer and then, after I got off the bus, I lost my way and had to run all the way here.' She stopped and beamed.

'I see,' Miranda muttered.

'So, er . . .' Jane pretended to look through loads of papers, no longer in the mood for talking now. 'You are

. . . Rosemary?'

'Rosemary Dalton, that's me.'

'And what experience have you work-wise, Rosemary?'

'Well,' Rosemary licked her lips and frowned. 'I wrote it on my job application.' She smiled and blushed. 'I've got, well . . . none, really. I, er, I just left school and I've always wanted to work in a hair saloon.'

'Have you?'

'Oh yes. I love doing people's hair. I cut all my mates' hair. Your hair,' she gazed in open admiration at Miranda, 'now, that's fab. I'd love to make people look like you.'

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Miranda rolled her eyes and muttered something that Jane couldn't quite catch.

Rosemary didn't seem to notice. She kept going. 'I'd do anything. Like, I know you won't let me loose with a scissors, for like, ooohhh . . .' she bit her lip, '. . . ages, but in the meantime, I'll do whatever you want.'

'Well, at the start, Rosemary,' Jane said gently, 'it'll be just sweeping and cleaning and washing the odd head of hair.'

'Yeah yeah, I know,' Rosemary nodded.

'Sometimes the odd head of hair is very odd,' Miranda said darkly.

'What?'

'She's joking,' Jane confirmed.

'I'm bloody not,' Miranda hissed.

Jane kicked her. Just because her fella had dumped her there was no need for her to carry on like she was.

'You'll get used to Miranda if you work here,' Jane smiled.

'Ohhhh,' Rosemary gave a few very unconvincing giggles. Then she gave some more. And then some more. Her hands twisted themselves into fists on her lap. 'I know loads about hair. I've got loads of hair books at home. I read all the time about hair, I do.'

'Good,' Jane wondered if maybe she might be suitable. 'Are there any questions you'd like to ask us?'

Rosemary looked at her with huge eyes. 'Any questions I'd like to ask yez? Oooh.'

'It's not a trick question.' Miranda's voice was brittle. 'Any time today now.'

Rosemary giggled again. 'You're funny.' She giggled some more before saying, 'Well, no, that's it really. Is my interview over now?'

Jane couldn't think of anything else to ask. The girl had no experience at all; her average exam results were on her CV, her CV was a mess. But, hey, she read books on hair, she was available, she would do anything and they were desperate.

'Well, thank you for coming Rosemary,' she said as she got up.

'So, when will I know?'

'Soon,' Jane said. 'Maybe tomorrow – we'll call you.'

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Beside her, Miranda let out a long slow breath.

'OK,' Rosemary got up too. She smiled brightly at them both as she hitched her glasses up her nose. 'I'll work really hard. I promise. Are there many in for the job?'

'Loads,' Miranda answered quickly. 'We'll let you know.'

Rosemary nodded. 'Thank you. Thanks.'

'I'll show you out,' Jane said. She tried to ignore Miranda who was rolling her eyes and pretending to gag. She'd tackle her later. As far as Jane was concerned, beggars couldn't be choosers. They needed a trainee and Rosemary would just have to do. She wondered if, in a few months, they would still be in business.

Patrick was going to flip when she told him about Cutting Edge.

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