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The Starter Marriage

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starter marriage: *noun.* A first marriage that lasts only a short time, does not produce children and ends in a clean divorce (*see also* STARTER HOME).

Chapter One

When Barney came into the kitchen on Boxing Day and told me he was leaving me for his secretary, I didn't cry. I didn't cling on to his ankles, begging him to stay. I didn't attack him with the Le Creuset pan I was drying at the time (the thought did occur to me but it was part of a set of five my parents bought us as a wedding present and a gap in the display rack would have added insult to injury).

All I said was, 'Let's try to make sure things don't get messy.'

He laughed, a dry, coughing sound that made me wince. 'No, of course not. There'd be nothing worse for Tip Top Tess than to make a mess, would there?' And he left the room and the house and our marriage. I finished drying the pan and hung it up before I burst into tears.

Tip Top Tess. It's not a sexy nickname, but it is accurate and if wanting things to be neat and tidy is my only fault, I don't think I'm doing too badly. I give to charity, I'm kind to animals and small children and I remember all my friends' birthdays. Since when has tidiness been a crime?

So when I spent the first New Year's Eve of my life alone, my resolution was to avoid nastiness, to stay as civilised and proper as I would in any other situation, to keep things shipshape. Ready for when Barney came back.

And, as far as my nearests and dearests are concerned, I've been pulling it off. Somehow I've managed to maintain the status quo, or at least the illusion of the status quo, for five months. Only I know how far I've slipped.

Until tonight: the doorbell rings and it all falls apart.

I tiptoe into the hall and peer through the spyhole. Mel's face looms up at me, distorted by the fisheye lens so she looks all

eyes and nose . . . exactly the features I don't want scrutinising my current living arrangements.

I wonder if she's seen me through the glass panel. I'm trapped now, unable to escape upstairs in case she catches a glimpse of movement and realises I'm here. Maybe if I crouch down behind the door and wait, there's a chance she might leave. No harm done.

The reproduction Edwardian bell rings again and I feel the reverberation through the wooden frame. Of all my friends, Mel is the least likely to give up easily. After fifteen years as a reporter, she's used to hanging about on doorsteps, playing cat-and-mouse with the criminals or adulterers inside. They always break before she does.

She sticks her hand through the letterbox, so I try to manoeuvre my body out of range. This means crouching down even further so that my head is on my knees and I get a close-up view of the carpet. It's worse than I thought: there are grey clusters of dust gathered like storm clouds at the edges of the skirting board and a pair of worn tights under the console table. She definitely can't come in.

But my faint hope that she might get bored and settle for leaving a note is dashed when she screams, 'Honey! I know you're in there! You forgot to turn the telly off.'

Oh God. The duh-duh-duh of the *EastEnders* theme tune booms from the living room, reinforcing my basic error. I feel like a character in a French farce, playing hide-and-seek with my best friend, only I don't feel any urge to laugh. Crying seems the more appropriate response, but my biggest fear is that if I start, I will never stop.

'Come *on*, Tess!' she shouts. 'I'm not going anywhere so you might as well open the door.'

My legs are aching now: I might have had a chance of sitting, or rather crouching it out before Christmas, when I was going to step classes three times a week and had thighs of steel. But then again, before Christmas I had no need to avoid Mel or anyone else.

On my hands and knees I reverse away from the door as far back as the stairs, stand up and then pound loudly on the bottom

step as if I'm walking down. I put the security chain in place, take a deep breath and finally open the door a few inches.

'About bloody time! What the hell have you been up to in there?'

'Um ... sorry, I was in the bath.'

She stares at me through the gap in the door. I'm still wearing my work clothes, there are biro marks all over my hands and my hair hasn't been washed in a week. 'Really?' she says. 'Well, now you're *out of the bath*, don't keep me standing here like a door-to-door salesman. I've brought a bottle of wine.' She waves an Oddbins bag at me.

'It's not a good time.'

'Don't be daft, honey. I'm fed up with you not returning my calls so I thought it was time to take affirmative action.'

'Honestly, Mel, I'm not in the mood ... I appreciate the gesture, but why don't we arrange to go out next week instead?'

'What, so you can cancel on me again?' Her face takes on the same determined expression she used to adopt on anti-apartheid demonstrations when we were students. She was always getting arrested, unlike me: a bolshie, busty black woman is bound to attract more attention from the cops than a tidy, skinny white one. 'No way. I am going to stay here until you let me in.'

'Give me a second,' I say, pushing the door to, while I consider my options. They're not exactly promising. If I let her in, she'll see the shocking state of my house and, by implication, the even more shocking state of my mind. But if I leave her outside, it'll give the neighbours something extra to gossip about. I'm sure it's only a matter of days before they present me with a petition about the height of the weeds in my tiny front garden. Victoria Terrace is that kind of street. I can't afford to give the Residents' Association any more reasons to complain.

'OK, you win.' I fiddle around with the chain before opening the door. The sunlight illuminates a million dust particles in the hall: I dread to think what it's doing to my poor, tired face. As Mel steps into the hall, I brace myself. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'About what?' she says, then stops short, looking around in

confusion, as though she's walked into someone else's house. 'What the hell's happened to Tip Top Tess?'

I've been wondering the same myself. My latest theory is that my alter ego slipped away with Barney – since he walked out with his suitcases, simply existing has taken all my energy. There hasn't been any left for the housework.

But there's a difference between a dim awareness that I might have let things go, and seeing the reality through someone else's eyes. Which is why I've let nobody across the threshold for five months.

'Mel, it's not as bad as it looks; I haven't had much time lately to do the housework, but—'

'I had no idea things were as bad as this . . .'

'Yeah, it's a bit depressing, I grant you. But, look, as you've come over, why don't we go out, grab a pizza?'

'Not till I've had a proper look,' she says, stepping cautiously over the piles of project work and free newspapers I've allowed to build up in the hall. To my worn-out mind, it's a logical place – handy for me to grab what I need before heading to school, and close to the recycling box I keep by the porch. Except I haven't got round to recycling since . . . well, since Christmas. 'At least now I can see why you haven't invited me round to supper for a while.'

I dash ahead of her to close the door to the kitchen; the mess in there makes the hallway look like Buckingham Palace. 'I haven't really been up to a six-course dinner party.'

The living room presents the next logistical problem. Every surface is covered in *stuff*. These days I tend to slump onto a floor cushion as soon as I get home, but it wouldn't be polite to expect a guest to do the same. I calculate instantly that the armchair will take the least time to clear. It's only holding a few dozen Sunday supplements and an empty pizza box. At least, I hope it's empty. The sofa is a different story, the tan leather barely visible under crisp packets and clothes and exercise books and unopened post. And as for the coffee table . . .

Mel pulls the tissue-wrapped bottle of wine out of the bag. 'I think it's time we had a little chat.'

My heart beats faster. Will I be able to track down two clean

glasses anywhere in the house? Perhaps the tooth mug will do for me, the one Barney and I brought back from Corfu in 1994 because its cobalt blue sheen reminded us of the painted houses. It might look a bit less decrepit than the chipped black enamel camping beaker I've been using for all forms of liquid refreshment, from morning coffee to evening whisky nightcap.

Who am I kidding?

I scrunch the blue tissue paper into a loose ball, and bounce it towards the gap under the sofa. Now I've given in to slob-dom, I must confess there is the occasional frisson of pleasure to be had from adding to the chaos.

'Nice wine,' I say, reading the label. I retrieve the corkscrew from under an upturned foil box that once held chop suey. I've developed a kind of radar which means I can always locate my Waiter's Friend. The same applies to my other lifeline, the TV remote. I use it now to mute the ever-whingeing cast of *EastEnders* and pass Mel the corkscrew. 'Back in a sec.'

It does pong a bit in the kitchen. I never quite got round to taking the rubbish out last week and this is the hottest room in the house. It's still only May but the slight whiff of sweet decay propels me back to the summers of my childhood, when the days were long, the tar melted beneath our feet, and the binmen went on strike.

There's bird shit splashed all over the window, just below the Perspex feeder that's attached to the glass with suckers. The few remaining seeds in the tray have sprouted spindly yellow shoots, like an experiment I'd do with the kids on photosynthesis. No wonder my feathered friends have taken out their frustration in a dirty protest on the decking. Judging from the kaleidoscope of different coloured droppings – black, green, mulberry-red – spring has been and gone.

Some people wouldn't bat an eyelid at this level of mess, but for me it's damning evidence of my failure. I can't manage to keep my house tidy, never mind hang on to my husband. And worse still, I can't ever imagine having enough energy to clear up again.

I deserve a stroke of luck, and at last I get one: there's a clean glass right under my nose, the one I got as a free gift for buying

six bottles of Grolsch in the supermarket last weekend. The beers are long gone – the empty bottles glint in the sunlight as they wait to make the perilous journey to the recycling basket all of six metres away in the hall – but I hadn't needed the glass because I'd drunk the contents straight from the chunky bottle necks.

I shut the door behind me again. Mel will never have to see the kitchen if I'm careful. If we need more booze, all the spirits are in the dining room, in what Barney used to call the drunks' cabinet. Food? I've got a collection of takeaway menus, which have the spooky ability always to rise to the top of the clutter in the living room, the same way scum always rises to the surface of a pond. The grease-marked photographs of pizza and curry tempt me night after lonely night, and my skin is suffering – pimples on top of my freckles – but what difference does it make? If anyone but me has noticed the state of my complexion, they haven't mentioned it. Perhaps they're just being kind.

By the time I return from my sortie to the upstairs bathroom to collect my tooth mug, Mel has opened the Chianti. I hold out the mug, hoping she won't notice the minty scum that a quick splash under the hot tap has failed to shift. 'Like being a student again, eh, Mel?'

'You were never like this as a student.'

The main problem with my best friend is that she's always right. The compulsion to keep mess under control started early for me: my plastic work tray in infant school was always beautifully neat, the pencils sharpened to the same length, felt-tip pens arranged in the order of the colours of the rainbow. *Tess is the most methodical child in her class*, my teacher wrote in my first ever report.

Now I have a classroom of my own and it is the tidiest in the school. I'm not obsessive about it. A group of twenty-three ten-year-olds will always cause a certain amount of disarray and it doesn't faze me when a field trip or an art session degenerates into an all-round dirt or paint fest. But I love the feeling when we restore order, the transformation of a squirming minibus full of energy and mud into a semi-circle of calm and concentration, gathering round me on the floor to listen to a story. They might

be nearly ready to move to secondary school, they might be more used to the instant gratification of Playstations and X-boxes at home, but this is my gift to them – the ability to be quiet *and* enjoy it. A life skill, if you like, and one their parents thank me for. Self-control is an asset as far as I'm concerned.

'Well, maybe it was about time I let go a little; you're always telling me to chill out.'

'This isn't chilling out, it's giving up the ghost. I mean, this is no worse than my place – you know I'd live in a pigsty quite happily. But not you, honey. You should have said something, asked me for help.'

But when you're the kind of person who only ever *gives* help, asking for it feels like an admission of failure. The only time I considered it was when I had that letter from Barney's solicitor and realised that I would need to engage one of my own. The first thing we could never share. The obvious solution was to call our university chum Sara for advice: she's always telling us that she's the best family lawyer in Birmingham. But asking one of our oldest friends to play piggy in the middle seemed more likely to increase the mess and that was the last thing I wanted. All the same, I was hurt that she never called me to offer.

The lawyer I picked from the Yellow Pages had a box of tissues on her desk, and tried to encourage me to 'let it all out'. She didn't seem to understand that spilling my guts in her burgundy leather-lined office would, for me, be as humiliating as appearing naked in assembly. Not to mention the fact that she'd be charging £150 an hour plus VAT for the privilege of listening. She suggested mediation, but that sounded even messier. So now Barney and I are in legal limbo, neither of us making the first move. And while part of me hopes that's a good sign, the organised side of me thinks it might be easier when everything's done and dusted. Especially dusted.

'I didn't think I needed any help.'

'What, you hadn't realised that you've turned into a candidate for those two battleaxes on *How Clean is your House?*'

'It's a gradual thing,' I say. 'An untidy house is the least of my

worries and anyway, how could I ask for help when there's nothing anyone can do?'

'The hoovering would be a start.' She smiles at me, and I try to smile back. The muscles in my face feel brittle, as if they might snap from this unfamiliar movement. Mostly these days I don't change my expression at all; it's too much effort. Why pay for Botox when splitting up can paralyse your forehead for free? Only it hasn't made me look youthful. Instead, everything is slumped, like a stroke victim with the dubious good luck of finding that both sides have been rendered equally droopy.

I suppose that's the difference between a broken heart at fifteen and a broken heart at thirty-five: the elasticity has gone. Maybe my ability to bounce back has gone, too.

We sit there for a while in silence. I don't do silence any more. The radio or TV always has to be on, voices in every room. Aural clutter, glorified white noise to stop me thinking about anything more meaningful than a soap-opera storyline.

I go over to the stereo and open the CD tray to see what's in there. Something mournful by Annie Lennox. I swap it for the new Coldplay album that Barney overlooked when he separated our music collections. That must have been a hard task. We'd been together so long that it'd never occurred to me whose musical taste was whose. It was a joint thing, a shared consciousness. Only the techno stuff was obviously his, the most recent arrivals and the first manifestation of the fact that he was changing. I should have noticed that, too.

I never, ever thought of myself as smug, but looking back, I was insufferable. We both were. Joined at the hip from the unnaturally early age of nineteen. Mel called us the Siamese twins, which we pretended to find irritating but would laugh about in bed when we got home from the pub, before falling asleep lying like the brand-new blue-handled spoons in our cutlery drawer.

'You shouldn't have cut yourself off from everyone, Tess. So many people care about you, but you have to open up, show us you need us.'

'I know.'

It's not that I don't feel as deeply as other people, it's just that

baring your soul doesn't get you very far with ten-year-olds. Barney was the big kid in our relationship, his gorgeous round face as full of enthusiasm as any of my pupils'. If someone called him immature, he'd take it as a compliment. He was always talking me into doing childish things: flying his kite in the Botanical Gardens, trying to teach the mynah bird swear words, dragging me into the rhododendrons for a kiss. I was the practical one, doing mental arithmetic with the entry charges to work out how much we could save by buying a Couples membership to the bloody place. How middle class. How middle aged. We were only twenty-one.

Perhaps that's why Barney's mid-life crisis came about ten years sooner than it should have done. On paper we were born into Generation X, but our role models were Terry and June. Maybe I bored him into adultery.

The stage was set the day we bought our first place together, leaving behind the sowing of wild oats in place of the laying of laminate. We even threw a party to celebrate our new floor. Wipe-clean. As the first of our posse with our own place, we had parties at the slightest provocation. We claimed we were taking the piss out of our domesticity, but there was pride too in how we'd spent three full weekends tearing out every trace of the faded granny-chintz carpet and laying those photographed pieces of wood. Clean, new, fresh. Very 1991. We made cocktails, blasted out club tunes on the still-cutting-edge CD player. Everyone knew we'd be the first to tie the knot, which we dutifully did five years later, and we also seemed the only ones of our set likely to stay the course. Mr and Mrs Leonard and their perfect life, to be followed in the perfect period of time by two perfect children.

Except of course, without us noticing, our friends began to overtake us. While they were pushing out offspring in maternity wards, we were laying newer floors, real oak in place of the laminate, hand-crafted Tuscan tiles in place of the lino, though we'd decided to keep the living room floor the same, as a memento.

And now? I've hung onto the house for the time being, but I don't know if the pain is worth it. Having to live with an endless

set of reminders, from the IKEA loo-roll holder to the brushed chrome door furniture, means there's no escape. Barney's probably got less floor-space in the Curved One's teeny, trendy loft apartment in St Paul's Square, but he's also got more thinking room.

The Curved One – I can't bring myself to use her name these days – is the biggest fake I have ever come across. The first time I met her was two years ago, at the annual Christmas house party Barney and I have hosted since the year dot. She arrived with the rest of the dull-as-ditchwater contingent from Barney's department at Cole, Murray, Tilbrook. But she couldn't help standing out, squeezed into a red sequinned dress that Pamela Anderson would have dismissed as too revealing. It matched her sparkly make-up and emphasised her artificially inflated cleavage, which in turn matched the false little giggle and flick of the wavy fringe that was her automatic response to anything any of the lawyers said.

I avoided her, because she made me feel unfeminine. Usually I'm grateful for the practical benefits of my boyish shape, having seen the agonies that Mel's gone through trying to be taken seriously with a chest that can stop traffic. It's only at parties that I miss having an hourglass figure with curves that are crying out to be contained in crushed velvet, or swathed in sheer black numbers, like a parcel waiting to be unwrapped.

But Mel, with her hundred-per-cent natural and hundred-per-cent astonishing breasts, was not so easily cowed by the cow. She put her best features forward and soon had the lawyers gawping like brickies and the Curved One pouting like a small girl denied an ice lolly. When she rejoined me by the mulled wine, Mel whispered in my ear, 'Chicken fillets, I'm sure of it. Imagine how some poor bloke feels when he gets her home, gets her kit off and finds she's filled out her bra with the high-tech equivalent of a pair of socks.'

We laughed at her, confident that as safely partnered grown-ups, we had no need to resort to underhand tactics in our underwires. It never occurred to me that she might have been competition. We just thought she was a silly little girl who needed to be taught a feminist lesson.

But Dawn had the last laugh.

Oh, shit. Her name makes me feel so sick.

'Tess . . . ?' Mel nudges me back into reality. It's quite shocking how little it takes to send me off into another world. Too much time on my own lately. My tooth mug is empty already and I hold it out for a refill of wine.

She hesitates, then pours it and says: 'I thought . . . well, we all thought you'd turned a corner. I mean, you'd stopped crying every time we went out.' She stops for a minute. We haven't been out since March; I don't have the energy any more. 'I thought, with it being . . . what, getting on for five months . . . well, you might have started to feel a bit brighter.'

I stare into my red wine as the bloke from Coldplay sings mournfully that nobody said it was easy.

'I never expected you to get better overnight,' Mel mumbles. She seems embarrassed at her shortcomings as my best mate, but I don't have the energy to be angry.

'I can't imagine ever getting better. I can't get him out of my head. He's been there for nearly half my life. How can I get rid of all that history, all those memories, without getting rid of what makes me me? There's no way . . .' I spot that the bottle of wine is nearly empty, and although it's only a couple of minutes since my last refill, I hold it up again, greedy for the last drop. 'Except for this way, of course . . . and booze only gives temporary relief.'

'The thing is, Tess . . .' Mel hesitates, then takes a breath. 'Well, I was in the library doing some research for an article and I found a leaflet. I kind of wondered . . . look, just think about it, OK?' She rummages in her handbag, draws out a piece of pink paper, and hands it over.

I unfold it and have to read it a couple of times before it sinks in. 'Divorce Survivors at St Gabriel's?'

'I know it sounds a bit naff, but anything's worth a try.'

'A "sympathetic, supportive environment to explore our past experiences and move on towards a better future"? Tell me you're joking, Mel.'

'No, look, maybe it's the wrong time for you. But maybe later . . . ?' She tails off.

I feel anger spreading through my body from the pit of my stomach, like a wave of nausea. 'Of course! You're right, this is bloody perfect. I can't imagine anything I'd like more than "a meaningful yet non-religious exploration of what you'd like to keep and what you'd like to change as you begin a new life". Fantastic. Just what I need to bloody well cheer me up. A bunch of God-botherers picking my sores once a week.'

She shrugs, defensive. 'It says they're *not* religious. I thought it might help. I didn't realise things were still as bad as—'

'Oh, right. So that's it. I'm such a boring loser that you thought you'd palm me off on some therapy group. Well, cheers. That's what friends are for, eh?'

Mel is staring at the floor. The celebrated floor. That bloody holy grail of coupledom. 'Tess, I'll listen for as long as you need me to. But I just thought you might get something out of talking to people who know what it's like. I'm sorry for misjudging the situation so badly.'

It is exactly the right thing to say. And exactly the wrong thing, because it triggers a drunken waterfall of tears that I've been damming for weeks. I try to get her to go, but she shakes her head and holds me until I give in. Not only won't she leave, but she then insists on trying to tackle the pile of washing up while I sit at the breakfast bar, surrounded by an avalanche of tissues.

She manages most of the crockery before giving up on the pans. 'I'll call James, let him know I'm staying here with you tonight.'

'What about Leo?'

'I kissed him goodnight. He won't even know I'm not there. No arguments, honey.' Then she takes me to bed with two big tumblers of tequila.

'If only *we'd* had kids,' I say, in the midst of a growing fuzziness. 'He'd have made a great dad.'

He probably still will make a great dad. Just not with me.

I wake up at four a.m. My drunken mind has been playing tricks on me, sensing the presence of another human being and concluding that Barney is back in his rightful place, by my side. I

roll over to embrace him, but realise my mistake just before I throw a dead arm across his shoulders.

My sleeping partner isn't snoring.

Slowly, so as not to wake Mel, I edge my woozy body towards the opposite side of my marital bed.