

Sue Donaghy

Business as usual

I'm sitting in the church beside Fintan six rows back behind the chief mourners. Believe Me, I've deliberated long and hard about where it would be appropriate for me to sit, if I were ever to find myself in this situation.. It isn't my place to sit at the front of the church with Kieran's family. I'm not part of his family, although I really am. In fact, I'm more his family than anyone here, except for his tearful widow Emily and her strong, dry eyed daughter Susan. I thought that it would have been wrong to draw attention to myself by sitting at the front of the church. However, I'm very much in mourning. I'm totally devastated. Kieran has been my rock, my port in a storm and my lover for years. I should have been sitting in the front pew. So, I'm sitting as close as I can, under the circumstances. I don't want to draw attention to myself.

Our relationship started 45 years ago. I was twenty five then and Kieran was ten years older than me. We were on a business trip together with other members of our team. I had already been married to Fintan for a few years. When Kieran invited me to his room for a drink, I had been naive enough to think that a drink in a man's hotel bedroom was just that. Yet somehow, he had managed to get me to overcome my initial reluctance and we started an affair.

I've never really considered how my actions might impact Fintan. What he never knew couldn't hurt him, I thought. We had been dating since school and we were married much too young. We had started to drift apart at the time I met Kieran. I suspected Fintan of infidelity at that time too but I hadn't been certain about it. Perhaps I had been too ready to assume that Fintan was playing away as well.. This meant I didn't need to feel any guilt about my own affair.

Even though I'm broken hearted, I can't stop being entertained by who has turned up for the funeral. Kieran certainly went around the world by way of a shortcut when it came to opting for a career. In fact, he had several. There's quite an eclectic mix of people here. There are retired engineers his own age. I can see some people here from the world of publishing. There are also some minor celebrities. Some actors who played bit parts in the local theatres. Some radio presenters. A handful of country singers who nearly made it. There's Eileen Fitzpatrick. Eileen Fitzpatrick! As I live and breathe! I'm surprised she's got the nerve to show up here after the way she pursued poor Kieran for all those years! Although, maybe I should stop being so judgemental. I know I shouldn't be spiteful, but she's certainly looking her age.

Opps, it's time for the homily now. Time to concentrate. Father O'Grady's homily should be interesting

“Fintan McMahon was an upstanding citizen.”

I'm nearly choking on that one. He had been my darling, the love of my life but he had never been an upstanding citizen. Occasionally, he had cheated on me although I couldn't really complain, seeing as he was cheating on his wife with me. I had been devastated to find out about his other relationships. (Eileen Fitzpatrick being a case in point.) We broke up and got back together more times than I can remember.

“He was a loyal family man, a devoted father and husband.”

Well, he had loved his only daughter Susan, that was for sure. I can't quite swallow the devoted husband bit but I don't want to think ill of the dead. We had discussed ditching our respective partners and setting up home together a few times but Kieran had always been a bit shy about that one.

“Nothing would give me more pleasure than to start a new life with you, but I owe so much to Emily. She has always been so supportive, especially when I kept switching careers. I just can't face breaking the marriage up. She's such a kind and gentle soul. It would devastate her.”

I was devastated when I knew for certain that you would never leave your wife for me, Kieran. I'm stealing a look at Fintan now. He's sitting upright and as still as a stone. I can't stop myself grabbing his hand for a bit of comfort. Not too much solace there, though. It feels as cold and as damp as a fish.

“He was a man of many talents. Originally, he came to engineering through the old fashioned technical route and learned everything the hard way. He had a stellar career in engineering and later moved into software development. Later, he became a senior manager. He moved away from the technical end of things and started a second successful career in publishing. Later on again, he moved into Public Relations. He had many influential clients, some of whom are here today.”

We always had excuses to travel away together as he always found some work for me on a freelance basis. Firstly, I developed software programmes for him. Later on, I did editing and indexing, even some secretarial work. No one would ever have assumed that we were anything to each other, other than colleagues. In more recent years, Fintan had been working abroad in Abu Dhabi for a bank there. My daughters, Gloria and Sylvia, had gone away to university. Emily was still travelling a lot for her job as a medical rep. I think of those few years as “Golden”. We had been discreet but circumstances had provided us with a large amount of leeway. Of course, more opportunities came at a time when nature had put a spanner in the works regarding our intimacy. The spirit was still willing but the flesh was weak! Still, we carried on for old times sake. Half a loaf is still better than no bread, Kieran liked to joke.

“He was funny and outgoing. He was a man of immense energy. He sat on the boards of many charitable organisations. He was an inveterate fundraiser. His wife, Emily, has told me that he was always very persuasive when it came to getting donors to part with their money.”

Indeed, he was very persuasive.! He could have persuaded the knickers of Mother Teresa, he was so convincing. To be fair, he was an excellent lover, back in the day. After our initial, rather clumsy first encounter, he was forever pushing at an open door when it came to that sort of thing. Fintan was never in the same league, although he did his best. Of course, he has given me my beautiful daughters Gloria and Sylvia, so it wasn't all a waste of time. In

fact, if I had never strayed, I would never have discovered that there was more on offer than Fintan was willing to give.

There had been lean times when our affair had dwindled away to nothing. I hadn't wanted to complicate things whenever I was starting a family with Fintan so I stayed away from Kieran then. The boat was hard enough to keep afloat without wondering which of the two men my offspring resembled. Some things were best not left to chance.

“Some years ago, his wife Emily was suffering from breast cancer which she later recovered from. Emily has told me that he was so attentive and inspirational that she couldn't have survived it without his support.”

That has started me thinking about their relationship now. He was devastated when Emily was diagnosed with cancer. He was overcome with guilt and I didn't see him for months. Did he love Emily? I had never stopped to think about it. He must have, surely? The way I love Fintan, or do I love Fintan? Fintan is like an old pair of shoes that you're reluctant to throw out because you know that you'd never get another pair as comfortable. Fintan is like mashed potatoes while Kieran was Pommés de terre Dauphinoise. Wasn't mashed potato better for your health? The other wasn't so good for you, too much cream and cheese.

Of course, I wanted to throw out the old pair of shoes and wear a more stylish, attractive pair from time to time. Just as well that didn't happen, though. Fintan is still at my side while poor Kieran is no more. Obviously, I have made the right choice, through no fault of my own.

If only there had been a way to have the two men rolled into one person. I would have had the perfect man. Someone with Kieran's marketing skills, flair and knowledge of fine wines along with Fintan's reliability. Now that would have been just the ticket. Perhaps I have been too greedy, wanting it all.

“Emily's job made it difficult to sustain family life but Kieran was always there to look after Sarah. At times, he was father and mother to Sarah.”

Well, I did know a thing or two about that one, obviously. Babysitters were paid overtime to facilitate our “chance” encounters which were anything but chance. The logistics were complicated. We would have needed flowcharts to keep abreast of hotel rooms, spousal absences, alibis and childminders. In fact, it seemed like another job, on top of parenthood and my freelance work. Of course, it was all worth it. My time with Kieran was a little touch of glitter thrown into a humdrum life. I don't know if it made my lacklustre life with Fintan more bearable or more difficult. I've never stopped to think about it before. Everything always seemed to have its place. Some things are too complicated to deconstruct.

“Looking around the congregation, I can see that he has touched a great many of you and was perhaps the instrument of change in your life.”

Well, he was certainly the instrument of change in my life. I had been expecting great things when Fintan and I had climbed into bed that first time on our honeymoon and had been more than slightly disappointed. I suppose our performance in that area overall may have been

average. However, there had been no bells ringing or fireworks zinging. That's the thing about Fintan. Fintan makes a habit of being average. He's had an average career, is average looking and has earned an average salary (although he was raking in the money when he took that job in Abu Dhabi) . Average is fine if you never had the chance to do better. Prosecco was adequate but champagne tasted amazing. My life has been like a train journey. Fintan and I travelled together in the standard carriage but Kieran sometimes invited me to join him in first class.

When he started to experience trouble with mental health issues, at first he started a local mens' support group. Many of you will be surprised to hear that Kieran latterly grappled with these problems as he always seemed so upbeat and positive. You can never judge a book by its cover and we should be sensitive to other people's hidden problems.

Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather when he told me that he had been feeling low. He had always been so robust and indestructible. That had been the beginning of the end, really. Somehow, Alzeimers had sneaked in behind the depression and started to steal him away. He didn't allow me to visit him at his home. When he first became depressed, he was overcome with remorse about his infidelity. I never knew if Emily was ever aware of his philandering. When I spoke to Emily on the phone, she never gave anything away. I suppose Emily was exactly the right woman for Kieran. She was accomplished, polished, successful and she was classy too. What did Kieran see in me, I'm now wondering? Maybe it was the sex, afterall. Maybe sex has always been my hidden talent and my superpower? Bloody Hell! What's happening to me right now. I can't stop smiling to myself but I can feel massive tears running down my cheeks.

Alas, this preceded the start of a rapid degenerative process. Kieran's decline was very swift. Perhaps this was kind to him and his family.

Well, it wasn't kind to me. I was thrown into a whirlpool and was totally helpless. I watched from the sidelines as my world fell apart. I couldn't find out what was happening to Kieran. I had no rights.

Let us all celebrate his life and remember all the good things he did.

The priest has just left the podium and has gone back to the business of saying the requiem mass. I don't think I can hold the tears back any longer. Fintan is looking helplessly at me now as I'm weeping openly. The people around me are staring. But I don't care. I can't stop now. I'm howling with grief. It's the end of the world as I knew it. Fintan has just passed me his handkerchief and I'm blowing my nose into it with gusto.

Fintan and I are sitting in the car now as the hearse bearing Kieran's coffin away has started its journey from the church. I'm calmer now, a little more composed. I'm still sobbing, however. I steal a glance at Fintan who is staring ahead. He is showing no emotion whatsoever.

"Fintan?" Fintan turns his head slowly towards me.

“Yes, love?”

“You have been such a patient, loving husband to me.”

“Well, of course I have. You’re my wife, the mother of my children.”

“I don’t deserve you, Fintan.”

“I know you’re upset about Kieran. I know you had a close working relationship with him. But you’re talking nonsense. We’ve had a great marriage. We’ve been through so much together. You’ve always been there for me. That’s what’s really important”

“But what I meant to say was, I haven’t always been there for you. You’re a good person, Fintan. You always deserved better than me.”

“Now, Sheila, you know that you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. I can’t imagine how my life would have been if you hadn’t been interested in me.”

“But Fintan, you deserve to know the truth about me.” Fintan is shaking his head.

“I know the truth about you. You’re the salt of the earth.”

“There’s something I have to tell you.” I can’t stand all this duplicity anymore. I’m going to tell Fintan everything. However, Fintan is placing his index finger on my lips.

“No, you don’t have to tell me anything. Please don’t. If you don’t tell me whatever it is you want to tell me, then I still won’t know it.”

I’m staring at Fintan with amazement. What does this mean? Has he known all along about Kieran and me but pretended he hadn’t? Is he playing a game with me at a time like this? Fintan took my hand and placed it on his lips.

“We’re the lucky ones. We still have each other. Let’s not waste these last few precious years we have together.” He let my hand go and turned the ignition key.

“We’d better get going if we want to get to the cemetery for the interment.”

The car is edging its way slowly into the cortege. I’ve just crumpled Fintan’s saturated handkerchief into my pocket.

“The traffic looks quite heavy now. It looks like it will take quite a while to get to Glasnevin cemetery.” I’m trying to make small talk to roll back from what just nearly happened.

“It will,”

The trauma is over. I’ve regained my composure. I’m looking at Fintan’s profile now. His chin juts out too far and his nose is a little on the large side. However, he looks good for his age. I want to kiss him and tell him how much I love him. But I’m not going to. I know he

wouldn't want that. At least, not here in the middle of the street, on the way to Kieran's burial. We're both looking straight ahead and acting like nothing almost happened.

It looks like it's business as usual for me and Fintan.