

BUSINESS AS USUAL

By Sue Donaghy

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. However, I'm very much in mourning. Kieran had been my lover for a long time.

Our relationship started forty-five years ago. I was twenty-five then and Kieran was ten years older. We were away on a business trip together. I had already been married to Fintan for a few years by then. 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. Anyhow, before I knew it, we had started an affair.

I didn't really think about what Fintan might think about it all. What you don't know can't hurt you, can it?

Despite everything, I can't stop being entertained by the people who have turned up for the funeral. There's quite an eclectic mix 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.

Eileen Fitzpatrick! As I live and breathe! She's got a nerve showing up here after the way she pursued Kieran all those years ago. I know I shouldn't be spiteful, but she's certainly looking her age.

Oops, it's time for the homily now. Time to concentrate.

'Kieran McMahon was an upstanding citizen.'

I'm nearly choking on that one. Upstanding indeed! Occasionally, he had cheated on me too. 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 loved his only child 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. I'm stealing a sideways glance 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. 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. 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 and Kieran's wife, Emily, was still travelling a lot for her job as a medical rep. I think of those few years as 'Golden'. Circumstances now 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, that didn't stop us.

'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. 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 bloomers of Mother Teresa! To be fair, he was an excellent lover, back in the day. Fintan was never in the same league. Of course, Fintan has given me my beautiful daughters, Gloria and Sylvia, so it wasn't all a waste of time.

There had been lean times when the 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 years ago, Emily was suffering from breast cancer, which she later recovered from. Emily has told me that Kieran was so attentive and inspirational and that she couldn't have survived it without his loving support.

That has started me thinking about their relationship now. He was devastated when Emily was diagnosed with cancer. Did he love Emily? Maybe he did, in 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 was mashed potatoes

while Kieran was *pommes de terre Dauphinoise*. Isn't mashed potato better for your health? There's too much cream and cheese in the other dish. 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 and flair, along with Fintan's reliability. That would have been the dream ticket!

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

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.

'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 but had been slightly underwhelmed. I suppose his performance in that area may have been average. 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 is adequate but champagne tastes amazing. Needless to say, Kieran was champagne.

'When he started to experience trouble with mental health issues, at first he started a local men's 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. That had been the beginning of the end, really. Somehow, Alzheimer's had sneaked in behind the depression and started to steal him away. When he first became depressed, he was overcome with remorse about his infidelity. He didn't allow me to see him anymore.

I'm thinking now that Emily was exactly the right wife for Kieran. She was accomplished, polished, successful and she was classy too. What did Kieran see in me? Maybe it was just sex after all? Perhaps sex was my super power? Bloody Hell! What's happening to me right now? I can feel tears streaming 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 forced to stand on the side-lines as my world fell apart.

'Let us all celebrate his life and 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. 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.'

'I hope so.'

'I don't deserve you, Fintan.'

'I know you're upset about Kieran, 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.'

'No, I haven't always been there for you.'

'Now, Sheila, you know that you're the best thing that ever happened to me.'

'But Fintan, I owe it to you to tell you the truth.' Fintan is shaking his head.

'I already know the truth. You're the salt of the earth.'

'There's something I have to tell you.' I can't stand it 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.'

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I'm staring at Fintan with amazement. Has he known all along about Kieran and me but pretended he hadn't? Is he playing a game? Fintan takes my hand and places 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 lets my hand go and is turning 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 moment of 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 that 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.