

Departure

Henry Farris came home from church one Sunday morning to find a note from his wife on the mantelpiece.

His heart immediately sank. Since it was, after all, a Sunday, this was unlikely to be a list of chores she required him to do; he never minded that. It was much more likely to be a list of his various failures and shortcomings during the previous week, accompanied by the information that she had gone out for lunch, which she very often did at weekends. But he was a dutiful husband, so he took it down and unfolded it anyway.

His eyebrows immediately shot up. The note informed him that she had now found a much better man, and had gone off to live with him; divorce proceedings would follow shortly. In the meantime, there was a list of things she had not been able to take with her in the car, and these she wished him to pack so that she could collect them quickly and without further ado.

Presumably she would not be coming back to collect these items the same day, so he reasoned that they could wait till tomorrow. He put the note in his pocket and went into the kitchen to prepare himself some lunch, which he then enjoyed in a blissful peace about which he felt a little guilty. It was always a pleasant change not to have to sit and listen to the regular caustic monologue, and the thought that he would now never have to do so again was making him feel a great deal happier and more relieved than he really felt he had any right to be. After all, Diane *was* his wife.

After lunch, he happened to glance out of the front window, and his gaze fell on the perfectly manicured lawn. Henry was a keen gardener, and he had never seen the purpose of a front lawn. The back lawn had been all well and good while their children were living at home; there was still a swing on it, hopefully awaiting the arrival of their first grandchild. But the front lawn was no good for either playing on or sitting on, since it was completely exposed to public view. It was simply a large, sterile expanse of overly neat turf. Diane, however, had insisted not only on having it, but on keeping it regularly watered in the summer and constantly weeded, an undertaking which, naturally, had fallen entirely on Henry's shoulders.

A broad smile spread slowly across his face as the realisation dawned on him that he no longer had to have that lawn. Tomorrow, he decided, he would give himself a day off and take a trip to the garden centre; since he ran his own business from home, that was easy enough, and in any case he had not had a proper day off for a while. But right now... he hurried upstairs, changed into a set of disreputable old clothes, then went out and fetched a spade from the shed. Digging up that lawn would take him the whole afternoon, at the very least, but it would be absolutely worth it.

By six o'clock he was no more than halfway through, and he was by now quite tired; so he came in, washed his hands, made himself some sandwiches, took half an hour out to answer a few e-mails, and then returned to the task in hand. It was quite dark by the time he had finished, but he was very satisfied. Already, in his mind, he had planned to divide up the area using paths made from rounded flagstones so that he could easily reach all the plants. There would be some low-growing shrubs, and a rockery area, and a wildflower patch to encourage the bees and other helpful insects, and a carefully chosen mixture of annuals and perennials to ensure that there was always something in season, and... what about a pond? Would there be room for a pond? No, perhaps not at the front, but now there was nothing to stop him from having one round the back. Perhaps it could be raised and kept in place by a low wall, for the safety of those possible future grandchildren. And, of course, where you had a low wall, you could have things like stonecrop and saxifrage and...

He took himself in hand. Not all at once, Henry. Let's just think about the front for now.

He had another wash and returned to his laptop, wondering if the children knew yet, and, if not, exactly how he was going to tell them. Probably neither of them would be too surprised; but they might still be shocked, which was not the same thing. There was no e-mail waiting from either of them, so he assumed they probably had not heard from their mother yet.

Maybe a phone call would be better? But... not at this time of night. Perhaps he should have rung them earlier and not been so wrapped up in the removal of the hated lawn.

So he contented himself, for the moment, with answering a few more e-mails that needed it, and then visiting a gardening site online so that he could make a rough list of the things he wanted for the front garden, with approximate prices. He had no intention of buying any of these things online when there was an excellent garden centre not very far away, but he also did not want to forget anything, and an idea of how much it would all cost was also useful to have. Oh... and on that note, he had probably better get Diane's name taken off their joint account and the various household bills. With that in mind, he went to check the account online, and was very surprised to discover that Diane had not withdrawn any money. He had rather expected her to take half of it. He had no idea what that meant. Either her new partner was very well off, or she was simply waiting for the divorce settlement and did not feel inclined to anticipate any of it. Well, he would check again the next morning.

It was after midnight by the time he finally went to bed. Some time between three and four in the morning, he was woken by a rather urgent call of nature; so he threw on his dressing gown and started tiptoeing to the bathroom as usual before

he suddenly remembered. Diane was not there. So he couldn't wake her up, whatever he did. He continued to the bathroom, walking normally, and again feeling guilty about the wave of relief that had just washed over him. In fact... why was he even still sleeping in the spare room? He could use the main bedroom now, where there was a convenient ensuite. Well, he was in the spare room for now, but in the morning he would move all his things back into the main bedroom, and that would also conveniently remind him to pack up the things Diane wanted, since most of them were in there.

The next morning, he made himself a leisurely breakfast. It looked very much like rain, so he decided to go to the garden centre first in the hope of avoiding a soaking. As soon as he had finished breakfast, he hurried out with the list he had made the previous night; the threat of rain would, at any rate, ensure that he bought only what he had already decided and was not tempted to linger and buy a lot of other bits and pieces. He arranged for the heavier items, including the flagstones, to be delivered the following afternoon, but he brought home everything he could carry himself. The new plants went into the shed for the time being, and then he went to see if any of the family had e-mailed yet.

Oddly, they had not. Henry was surprised; he would have expected Diane to have told their two children by now. Once again he seriously considered e-mailing them himself, but concluded that a phone call would be much better. He would ring them both in the evening, once they were home from work. For now, he went back upstairs, where he moved his pyjamas and other personal items into the main bedroom, his washing and shaving things into the ensuite, and, for the moment, all of Diane's remaining clothes onto the bed while he decided exactly how to pack them. She had already taken all the suitcases. There were, of course, bin bags, but he felt that was not the best solution. Things would get creased. After a while, he recalled that there were some large cardboard boxes in the attic left over from their last move, and kept just in case of any future moves. One of those, he felt, would do the job.

The packing took longer than anticipated, because everything had to be rolled up carefully. Diane had taught him that. Never fold clothes when you pack them, she'd said. Always roll them. They crease much less that way. Obviously one did have to fold them a little first so that they would roll up neatly, but the trick was to do that as little as possible. There were also some items on the list which were not clothes; some of the ornaments, in particular the bronze statuettes (which happened to be quite valuable), for instance. The ornaments were all joint property, but there were some she particularly liked and wanted to take. Henry carefully packed them among the clothes so that they would not bump into one another. The jewellery, he decided, could go on top. She was fond of her jewellery, so she would want to be able to get at that as soon as possible. Though she specifically did *not* want the necklace he had bought for her fortieth birthday; he thought that perhaps their daughter Alice would like it.

He was still packing when his mobile phone rang. He took it out of his pocket and answered it.

“Hallo, am I speaking to Henry Farris?” asked a female voice.

“That’s correct, yes. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling from the Bolecester Royal Infirmary. I’m afraid your wife was admitted last night following an accident. Please drop whatever you’re doing and come over here straight away.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Henry. “Can I... can I ask why I didn’t get a call at the time she was originally admitted?”

“It’s... look, we’ll explain as soon as you get here,” replied the voice. “I’m sorry. You do need to hurry.”

“Oh dear. I really don’t like the sound of that,” said Henry. “I will be over at the utmost speed.”

There was a bus to the hospital, but it took him no more than a few seconds to determine that his bicycle would get him there faster, in the absence of the car. He hurried downstairs, got the bike out of the shed, and set off through what was now a steady drizzle. By the time he arrived, he was quite wet and also growing very hungry, since he had not yet had lunch. He locked up the bike and ran inside to the reception area.

“Excuse me,” he said. “My name’s Henry Farris. I’ve just had a phone call to tell me that my wife Diane was admitted last night as an emergency. She had some kind of accident. I was asked to get here as soon as I could.”

“Oh! Oh, yes. One moment,” said the receptionist. She picked up a telephone receiver, dialled a number, and said, “We have Mrs Farris’s husband here. Where should I send him?”

There was a short reply, and the receptionist thanked the person at the other end of the line and turned back to Henry. “Sister will come and get you now,” she said.

“Sister”, who had an oriental look about her which Henry correctly pegged as Filipina, came striding down the corridor at speed within minutes. She asked Henry to accompany her, and, as he did so, he repeated his question about why he had not had a call when Diane had been admitted.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “I’m very sorry about that. What happened was that her new partner brought her in, but at the time he claimed to be her husband. It wasn’t

until she started to deteriorate badly that he... changed his tune. That was when he admitted that she was actually still married to someone else. He knew your first name, and we got your number from her phone.”

“Ah,” said Henry. “And is he still in the building?”

“He is, but you needn’t worry about that,” Sister assured him, completely misreading the point of Henry’s question. “As soon as we found he wasn’t her next of kin, we asked him to leave her bedside. He didn’t have a right to be there. But he said he’d wait in one of the reception areas till he got some news, so that’s where he is.”

She ushered him into a small ward. Diane was lying on the bed, apparently unconscious, with a heavily bandaged head and hooked up to various equipment. A nurse was standing over her, checking the readings. “Any change?” asked Sister.

The nurse shook her head. “Things aren’t looking good.”

“What exactly happened?” asked Henry, going over to Diane. He picked up her limp hand; there was no reaction.

“She fell down the stairs,” Sister explained. “She was brought in with a fractured skull, some other broken bones, and a lot of internal injuries. We operated on her straight away, and that did seem to stabilise her briefly... but there was a lot of damage.”

“Diane?” said Henry. There was still no response.

Henry sighed. “I think it might be a good idea if someone fetched her new partner. She may possibly respond to him.”

Sister’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. It would be a kindness.”

“Very well. I’ll get him.”

Sister hurried out, leaving Henry alone with Diane and the nurse. There was an awkward silence, which the nurse eventually broke.

“I’m so sorry about all this, Mr Farris,” she said. “I had no idea she’d just left you until about an hour ago. One shock like that is bad enough, but two?”

“Well, I must admit I wasn’t entirely shocked when she left,” Henry admitted. “I’d been expecting her to do it for quite a while. It’s not as bad as you think.”

“Do you know her new partner?” asked the nurse.

“I have no idea,” replied Henry, honestly. “She didn’t say who he was.”

“So... what did she do? Just text you or something?”

“Oh, no, she did it the old-fashioned way. She left me a note. And since she was always leaving me notes in any case, there was nothing immediately odd about it, so I was rather surprised when I opened it.”

Sister returned with a tall man with a slight stoop and a hangdog expression. He eyed Henry very uncomfortably.

“Ah,” said Henry. “I don’t think we’ve met. My name’s Henry Farris, and you are...?”

“Jim Woods,” mumbled the newcomer, looking very much as if he wished himself anywhere else but where he was.

“I’m not going to bite you,” Henry assured him. “I thought, you know, Diane might respond better to you than to me. I can’t get anything out of her. Would you mind seeing what you can do?”

“You seem... very calm,” said Jim.

“I don’t see any point at all in making a scene,” replied Henry. “And I would very much like her to rally, if that’s at all possible. I’m aware that I’m not likely to have that effect on her, and there’s no point in pretending I am.”

Jim awkwardly walked round to the other side of the bed and took Diane’s other hand. “Um... Diane?” he said.

She half opened her eyes and smiled weakly.

“Stay here,” Jim pleaded. “Don’t leave me!”

She tried to say something, but no words came out.

“Diane,” said Jim. “I just want you to know I feel awful about those stairs, and if you make it through I’m going to put a gate in at the top so there’ll never be any more accidents like that. And then when you’re completely better we’ll go to New Zealand like you wanted, and we’ll...” He broke off, unable to continue.

Henry put a companionable hand on his arm. “Steady. Take a few deep breaths.”

“Don’t be so bloody nice to me, Henry,” said Jim wretchedly. “I don’t deserve it.”

“I’m sure it was just as much her fault as yours,” replied Henry reasonably. “I don’t imagine you set out with the specific intention of leading her astray.”

“It’s not just that,” Jim moaned. “I’ve done a lot worse... well, that is, I was going to, but now I’ve met you I can’t go ahead with it. But I would have done if I hadn’t.”

“I’m sorry, both of you,” said the nurse gently. “She’s gone.”

Jim buried his head in his hands. Henry sighed again. “I would never have wished that on her,” he said. “No matter what she’d done.”

Jim looked up bleakly. “She said you didn’t love her.”

“I didn’t, in the end,” Henry admitted. “I did to begin with. I loved her very much. And I was always aware she didn’t love me in return, but... I was a young idiot, and I thought I had enough love for both of us. That, sadly, didn’t work. It never does.”

“You didn’t ask me what I was going to do that was so bad,” said Jim.

“Since you didn’t actually get as far as doing it, do I really need to?” asked Henry.

“I’m going to tell you anyway because I need to get it off my chest,” Jim replied. “You know she was going to divorce you?”

“Yes, indeed, she said as much in the note.”

“Did she say on what grounds?”

“No, and I must admit I hadn’t thought about that,” said Henry. “After all, it’s easy enough to get a divorce for almost any reason these days.”

“Well... she was going to divorce you for adultery. She reckoned that would make the court more sympathetic, so she’d get a better settlement.”

Henry frowned a little. “But I’ve never committed adultery.”

“She knew that. So she wanted some forged evidence.” Jim heaved a sigh. “I’m a software developer. A good one. I know how to make deepfakes. She asked me to do that. And I’m very sorry to say I agreed to it.”

“Ah,” said Henry. “Then it’s very much as well that you didn’t, in the end.”

“Yeah... now I’ve met you, I would not want to do that to you.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Henry. “But, as it is, no actual harm has been done, so I’d like you to stop beating yourself up over it, if at all possible. I’m more than happy to forget all about it.”

“You’re nothing like what she said,” said Jim, wonderingly. “At all.”

“She may have been a little biased,” replied Henry, with masterly understatement. “May I have your mobile number? Obviously you should be present at the funeral, if, of course, you’re able to attend.”

Jim took out a notebook, tore out a sheet, wrote down the number, and handed it over without a word.

“Thank you,” said Henry. “I may give you a call during the week just to find out how you’re getting on; I certainly hope to, but things are going to be busy for a while. I work from home, and there’s the funeral to sort out, and I’m going to have to explain to the family what happened, which I’m afraid won’t be easy... oh, and at some point I’ll have to get the plants in so that they don’t all wilt. I, ah, dug up the front lawn yesterday.”

Jim blinked. “Why?”

“Well, because Diane had left me. And I thought, if she’s gone, then I don’t have to have the front lawn any more, so I dug the whole lot up straight away. You’ll have to come round and see it some time, once I’ve got all the new plants in and all the rest of it. I’ve planned quite a display.” He smiled.

“She said you were lazy,” said Jim, clearly astonished.

“Oh, yes, I know, she did. All the time,” replied Henry. “But, if you don’t mind... I’d rather not think of that any more. That is not how I want to remember her.”

“How do you want to remember her?” asked Jim, curiously.

“Oh, things like... when she had the children. It was always lovely to see how much she cared for them, right from the very start. She was a good mother.”

“For them,” said Jim, “but... not for you?”

Henry sighed again. “She always very much wanted children.”

“And you were the means to that end?”

Henry said nothing.

“Er... gentlemen...” said the nurse.

“Oh! Oh, yes. Sorry,” said Henry, contritely. “Here we are just talking, and you have patients who need looking after. We had both better go. Thank you so much for everything you and your colleagues did to try to save Diane. Your efforts are very much appreciated.”

They both left the ward. Jim looked at Henry. “Did you walk here? You look a bit damp. I’ll be very happy to give you a lift home if you need one.”

“Thank you very much, but no, I cycled, and you probably don’t want my mucky bike in your boot,” Henry replied. “And, in any case, I think it’s more or less stopped now. I should be pretty much dry by the time I get home.”

“OK.” Jim paused. “Can I just say something? I’m really, really glad I’ve met you. It’s been a real eye-opener.”

“I’m also very glad to have met you,” replied Henry. “I’ll admit, I had feared it might be someone I already knew, which would have put a massive strain on the friendship, at least for a while. But it’s you, and now I have the chance to start to get to know you from scratch, with all the awkwardness already out in the open, as it were. And I would like to do that. Of course you did make a mistake, but we all do that at some point.”

“Huh. I’m starting to think it may have been a much bigger mistake than I first thought it was,” said Jim. “She said so much about you that turns out to be very obviously not true, so... I can’t help wondering what else she might have been lying about.”

“I think calling it lying is a little harsh,” Henry pointed out. “She had her own view of me. I believe it was a mistaken view, but I don’t think she ever actually made anything up deliberately. I think that was simply the way she saw me, and she told you honestly what she saw. That’s all.”

Jim thought about this for a while. Then he said, “If she’d ever come to see me like that, I couldn’t have borne it.”

“But she didn’t. And I’m very sorry that you lost her so soon after you found her, but at the very least you do have the consolation of knowing that she loved you.”

Jim gazed at him.

“Do I, I wonder?”