

The Wife

By Sarah Gilmartin

In the taxi on the way to the courthouse we pass the restaurant. I am sitting behind you, staring at the grey-black hairs on the back of your neck, the cowlick that disappears into the starched collar of your shirt. You don't look at the restaurant, not even an involuntary glance. You keep your eyes on the road ahead, as the traffic slows for the lights and we stop outside the ivy-covered building. The shutters are down, as they always are this time of the morning, but we both know they will stay that way through the lunch rush, and the dinner service too, that our restaurant – our beloved restaurant of twenty years – is no longer fit for purpose.

The taxi driver is not a subtle man. A Northsider with a wide face and mean, pinhole eyes, he leans in towards the gear stick and makes a show of looking at the building. He smacks his lips together and says *hmm*.

He is inches from your suit and I want to tell him to be careful, that I was up at six to iron it, that I got every crease out, over and back the glide of hot metal and the hiss of steam, as if it might make a difference to the verdict.

The lights mercifully change and we continue up the quays. The driver seeks me out in the rearview mirror. I try my best to hold his gaze, the pinpricks of contempt that beam their message into the stuffy car. I know, they say, I know all about you and your dirty family.

Because everybody knows what you've done, or I should say, what you've been charged with doing. Our barrister Roger has taught us the right way to speak, though mostly he advises saying nothing. Not to our family, or friends. Not to the reporters who ring our house at all hours looking for comment. Not to the editor of a Sunday broadsheet who I thought a good friend, until she dropped me an email – an *email* – to say she'd be pleased to tell my story once the trial was over. In my upset, I knocked a coffee onto the keyboard and now Kevin does his homework on the library computers in school.

I didn't reply to the email and I've blocked the woman's number on my phone. My story. What does that even mean? What would I say? That there were plenty of times over the years

when I doubted you, when I wondered. But there was never anything concrete, there was always a reason or excuse. You were special – charismatic, gifted, larger-than-life – and I thought, if there was infidelity, *if* it did happen, you were the victim not the perpetrator. Your soft humour left you open, vulnerable to advances from the ambitious young women you employed.

I understand now that I was wrong. After weeks of listening to their stories, each one growing ever more horrific in the dull repetition of your methods, I realise that it was you who was to blame. But what can I say after all this time? That I'm blind. That I'm stupid. That I'm only the wife.

When the driver puts his eyes back on the road, I see my own reflection in the mirror, the pale, powdery foundation and peach lipstick that's already dried into my bottom lip. I tug at the cracked skin with my teeth, rip off a patch, swallow it down. My ash-blonde bob is smooth and perfect, just as it has been every morning. This is who I've become: a woman who gets her hair blowdried to look presentable for the gallery. A woman who has aged years in a matter of months.

"Hmm," the driver says, catching my eye once more. "Traffic is brutal."

I look at the ground, at the pointed stilettos that have given me blisters. I take one foot out, stretch my toes on the rubber mat. You shift in your chair suddenly and we're face to face, your furrowed brow and dark, imperial eyes. You look too big for the space, like a toddler hemmed into a high chair.

"Did you lock the front door?" you say.

I have an urge to laugh but I know the driver is listening. I say that of course I locked the door, but actually I've no memory of doing it, and your question has made me doubt myself. I imagine some reporter, leaving his colleagues at the courts to try his luck, like a burglar who hits up a house at a funeral. I can see him pushing open our front door, walking up the stairs, touching the photos that hang on the wall, finding my nightdress under the spare room pillow.

"Don't be silly," I say.

My voice is clipped, back to its British roots these past few months though I've lived in Dublin for most of my adult life. You look at me forlornly, then turn back in your chair. For a

second I think about patting your shoulder, touching the sides of your neck where the tan lines have faded. Almost in the same breath, I want to pinch the skin between my fingers, get my manicured nails deep into your neck and twist so hard that you howl.

“We’re going nowhere fast,” you say to the driver. “Is this the best way?”

The driver looks in the rear-view mirror, points to the clock. “Ten, fifteen minutes tops,” he says. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you to the church on time.” He gives a hoarse chuckle and the smell of stale cigarettes grows stronger.

You become bigger in the chair. Your shoulders stiffen, rising up over the leather. I can feel the anger coming off you in sparks and I close my eyes and wish the day to a finish.

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I was always attracted to your bulk. The first time I saw you, in the bar of the Merrion after you’d finished your shift, I knew that we’d have sex. You had big, blunt features and the kind of oversized head that makes a man look important. Your forehead was all talk. You were already famous then, a Michelin star at twenty-five, and there were rumours of you leaving the hotel to set up your own place. I wasn’t afraid of your celebrity like the Irish girls. I was kind of famous too, at least in theatre circles. I’d played every posh girl’s role you could think of in the Abbey and the Gate. The week before I met you, I’d been offered the understudy of Hedda in a West End run. But the rest, as they say, is history. We went out, we got married, we had Kevin, and we threw everything else into making the restaurant a success.

For a long time I was the wife of a famous chef, I was the blonde beauty with the dramatic touch that worked so well for front-of-house, though it is fair to say I wasn’t the managerial type, that we brought in others to look after the books, the orders, the staff. But I was there. Thousands of nights over the years, I was there. That is what I don’t understand. There are so many questions since the allegations started. Why did you do it? Why did you throw away our livelihood? Our lives. What kind of man did I marry? But most of all, I want to know: how did I not see it?

One after the other those women took the stand, young and eloquent and honest.

The woman you told to shake her titties for a table of your friends.

The woman you asked for nude pictures.

The woman you cornered in the cold room.

The women you harassed with obscene text messages.

The parts of these women you touched: breasts, legs, asses—worse. The woman whose crotch you grabbed in the middle of the dining room, pretending you were searching for a pen. I remember that night. I laughed along with everybody else. The woman – the girl, really – laughed too. I watched her back away from you with her hands full of empty plates and thought nothing of it.

In our restaurant, where guests wined and dined and had a great time. In our restaurant, with the magnolia walls and low lighting and the soft grey velvet of the seats. In our restaurant that has two stars. In our restaurant that is now a hostile environment of pervasive sexual misconduct.

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The driver crosses over the bridge near Heuston and turns onto the northside quays. In the distance I see a crowd outside the courthouse, bigger than usual. The cameras are hoisted on shoulders, ready with their relentless mechanical eyes. I pat down the hem of my skirt and pluck a hangnail from my finger. I wish I had something to say to you, some words of comfort or love that I could call up from a younger version of myself. You look down at the ground and I know you want to shield your face, but you won't, because Roger has told you not to.

"I'll go round the side," the driver says.

You say ok, and we turn the corner for the wrought-iron gates of the side entrance, the pub where the lawyers go for lunch.

The driver pulls up on the kerb beside the barrier, gives a wave to the guard inside the kiosk. A group of men with cameras rush round from the front, the women following after, then

the flashes and shouting begin and someone thumps the side of the car I'm sitting on and the reverberations go deep inside me like a wound.

The driver curses and tries to move his car. I look out the far window. Across the road, a few metres down from the pub, two men in black gowns and wigs are talking to each other, pretending not to see our car.

I recognise the tall one, and my breath catches with the shame. A man I went out with before you, not for long, just enough dates to call it a thing. I have a memory out of nowhere: the night he came to see me in some play and gave a standing ovation at the wrong time, and then later, the pair of us running down O'Connell Street in the rain, trying to lose the rest of the cast. He catches my eye for a split second now, gives a respectful nod and moves his colleague down the footpath with a hand on his back.

You are out of the car before I realise it has happened. The cold air comes in like a slap. You are standing in front of me, holding open my door, and I see the glint of impatience in your eyes. Kevin's eyes. The driver is talking some drivel but I can't understand him with the noise from outside. I look up into your face and the years are peeling back and I see you properly for the first time in decades, I see you hiding there in front of me in plain sight: a stranger, a man I'm walking up to in a hotel bar, a mistake.

I grab the handle of the door and pull it towards me, feel the weight of your resistance as you twist against it and then the relief of the latch closing.

"Drive," I say, looking straight at the taxi man.

"What?" The delight on his face, the story he'll have to tell his wife once the day is over.

There is the palm of a hand against the window pane, pressing pink and waxy on the glass, some cameraman's hand, or yours.

"Drive on," I say again.

About the Author

Sarah Gilmartin is an arts journalist who reviews debut fiction for the Irish Times. She has an MFA from University College Dublin (2018/2019) and is co-editor of Stinging Fly Stories. Her short stories have been listed for the Sean O’Faolain Short Story Award, the RTE Francis MacManus Short Story Award, and the Hennessy New Irish Writing Prize. Her poem Questions and Answers, inspired by the testimony of abuse survivor Michael O’Brien on RTE, was published in Ropes Literary Journal. Sarah won Best Playwright for her play Match at the Short+Sweet Dublin 2019 festival. She is represented by Sallyanne Sweeney of MMB Creative.