

# **The Case of the Vanishing Husband**

**By Aoife Clifford**

## The Case of the Vanishing Husband

Greta hadn't come up with an original New Year's resolution in years. They had run along the same lines like clapped out old trains. *Do more exercise. Lose weight. Stop yelling at the kids.* But, as she sat alone in her house, aged forty-three, drinking champagne she couldn't afford and flicking through a book on poisonous plants, she decided this year would be different. At midnight, to the sound of nearby fireworks and drunken happy people, she pledged that Stephen, her soon-to-be ex-husband, would be dead before the next one.

Greta was almost the last person to know that her marriage had ended. Stephen had called his mother a day earlier to give her the news. He sent an email to their friends giving his new contact details. He had even taken their two children, Thomas and Belinda, for a weekend drive, telling Greta to enjoy some time to

herself. Suspicious behaviour, she realised all too late, but at the time, she was grateful. Belinda told her afterwards that Daddy said he was moving to a new house and not to tell Mum, as he wanted it to be a surprise.

Instead, Stephen told Greta after she had finished ironing his business shirts on the Wednesday night. She didn't usually iron them, but she intended it as a non-verbal thank you for the break and also because work had been so busy she had forgotten to take them to the dry-cleaners.

Stephen wandered into the living room with his gym bag. Exercising was a new activity that Greta had encouraged, even though it had him out at all hours. He was wearing the cashmere jumper he had brought back from his business trip. Greta normally picked his clothes for him. She wouldn't have bought it, grey with burnt orange stripes, a bit too trendy really. Not something that would wear well, like navy. But still, he did look nice.

'Shan't be long,' she said. He opened his mouth as if to reply, thought better of it, and went out again.

Greta enjoyed ironing, though she always wore non-crushable clothes. It was the crisp paper smell, a mixture of metal, cotton and steam. Damp becoming dry. Wrinkles disappearing, clothes made new. She ironed happily, unaware that upstairs Thomas was viewing

internet porn instead of doing his homework, Belinda was packing toys into her school backpack, because she wanted to live in the new house too and Stephen was in the next room, sending his email and rehearsing the words to tell her that their marriage was over.

After she had finished the shirts, even ironing six hankies domestic-goddess style, Stephen returned with both his suit and gym bags. He carefully packed the shirts away. Finishing up this life and moving on to the next.

'When are you back from the conference, then?' she asked, her mind full of the complicated week's timetable and wondering would she get away with sneaking out of work early tomorrow to get Thomas to basketball training, which was supposed to be Stephen's responsibility.

'Well, that's the thing,' he said, and told her that he wasn't coming back. He wanted to be with Nina, but thanks for the shirts.

Outwardly, Greta continued as normal, to flick off the power point, pull the plug out, leave the iron to rest on the table, collapse the ironing board. Inside, she was collapsing at the shock he was leaving her. Leaving her for Nina. Nina who had been his PA for six months and was at least fifteen years younger than Stephen. Nina who Stephen had told her, 'wasn't bright but would do.'

As Greta straightened up, Stephen perfected a blank gaze that covered everything in the room, everything except Greta.

‘But Nina’s a lesbian.’

Greta was sure that she hadn’t dreamt this or inferred it from the fact that Nina had once played women’s cricket. She was certain that’s what Stephen had told her before he went on an important work trip, for which he needed his PA.

‘She’s bi-sexual,’ Stephen said, and he tried to contain the triumphant thrill he got when he imagined Nina’s past sex life, and instead Greta saw the same scornful look that Thomas gave her, whenever she ventured opinions about social media and teenagers. A look to make her feel old and that she didn’t understand this world any more.

And then Stephen vanished into the night, leaving her crying downstairs and Belinda, crying upstairs, because looking after an eight year old wasn’t part of his plan. Thomas remained oblivious and didn’t find out until the next day.

The only person who found out after Greta, was Stephen’s older sister, Miriam. Stephen had been too nervous to tell her. Miriam, a keen member of the amateur dramatics society, had known her entire life

that Stephen was selfish and spoilt. It was Greta who never missed one of her ‘little productions’ and had even watched multiple performances of Miriam as the ‘body in the library’ when she didn’t say a line. It had been a challenging role for Miriam as she had trained herself not to blink for over half an hour to be authentic. Stephen never turned up at any of them.

Without Miriam, Greta didn’t know if she would have got through the next few months. It was as if Stephen had stuck a knife into her heart that was impossible to remove. Crying in the toilets at work every day, having married acquaintances avoiding her, as if unfaithful husbands could be contagious, and putting up with patronising advice about pulling herself together because of the children. Greta felt that she had lost her life map (happily married working mum with a husband to grow old with) and in return she had been given a compass that continually led her south.

The reality of what was happening to Greta came in waves. Some days she felt numb. Other days, she was so raw she expected beads of blood to appear on her skin.

Friends professed to be shocked by Stephen’s infidelity, but the divorced mothers at school told her the truth. With every second weekend without kids, the divorced mothers often went drinking at the local bars.

‘He bought us all champagne and told Bec she had great tits and was she interested?’ said Linda (*husband left when she was pregnant with their fourth child*). Bec (*husband left after she had spent a year nursing his mother with dementia*) patted her on the back and gave her the name of a good solicitor.

She didn’t feel like killing Stephen, until she opened her first legal bill. Russell, the good solicitor, had gone through the costs at her first meeting. But it had been on a numb day, and she had stared at the photo of his wife on his desk and wondered if Russell was having an affair with the receptionist, a cow-eyed lump called Cheryl. The envelope from Russell had sat on the table for a week, under the local paper, notices from school and junk mail. It wasn’t until Miriam insisted that they tackle the housework, that it was discovered. Stephen claimed he wanted a quick cheap divorce, but when Stephen systematically undervalued properties held in his name, hid company assets and deliberately underestimated his future earnings, the discovery costs had risen steeply. The amount was enormous, so mind numbingly huge, that she couldn’t remember being solely responsible for such a large bill in her life. It was going to cost a fortune to end up with only half of what she had always assumed would be hers. Greta began to scream.

Miriam, busy de-moulding the shower, came running and Greta, eventually progressing from hysteria to hiccuping, managed to get out, ‘Kill...bastard... Stephen.’

‘A cup of tea,’ said Miriam, bustling off to make it. Miriam said no more about Greta’s outburst. But that afternoon when she was leaving, after emptying and re-stacking the dishwasher and putting a casserole in the oven, Miriam gave Greta a hug, even though they didn’t have that sort of relationship. It had been such a long time since Greta had been properly held. Not the brusque bear wrestle that Thomas sometimes bestowed, or the squirming squealing hug that Belinda might give under sufferance. A proper hug from another adult for comfort. Greta buried her face into Miriam’s shoulder and tried not to cry.

‘Now, you won’t do anything foolish, will you,’ Miriam said.

That night Greta picked up a book given to her by one of the divorced mothers. It was a self-help book that claimed you could get anything you wanted using the power of visualisation. Act as if you had it already, the book said. If it was a car, pretend it was in your driveway. If it was a house, draw a picture and pin it to the wall. Greta decided, as she lay in the bed she used to

share with Stephen, that what she really wanted, above everything else, was a hitman.

By the time her children were out of bed the next morning, there were pancakes for breakfast and school lunches had been packed instead of a hastily scrawled lunch order. Greta had finished reading the book. Apparently the universe was multi-dimensional and energy was never destroyed or created but would become exactly what you wanted, if only you gave it attention. Greta didn't have a clue what this meant but it felt important and she underlined it several times. There was a lot of nonsense about letting go of anger but Greta flicked through that section. If Stephen was going to die, she had to make sure people weren't going to blame her. So while she was waiting for a hitman to turn up, she was going to have to fool everyone into believing that she had got over the breakup.

It wasn't easy but eventually she came up with the idea that every time she thought of Stephen, she visualised him dying horribly. It was surprisingly cathartic. When she caught Thomas lying about nicking twenty dollars out of her purse, she didn't scream at him that he was deceitful just like his father, but instead imagined running Stephen over with the new red sports car that he had bought himself. When Belinda said that

she wanted to live with Dad all the time, because Nina let her stay up late watching the Ashes and eating ice-cream, she smiled and pretended Stephen was getting skewered with the sharp end of a cricket stump. And when Stephen upped his divorce settlement offer from ludicrous to just barely enough, she accepted - the house, a lump sum that cut all financial ties, and the children to be his sole beneficiaries in the case of death. 'His father died young of a heart attack,' she explained to Russell, insisting this was not negotiable. 'Bad hearts run in his family.'

There were setbacks. The time she drove past Nina jogging near her local shops. Nina's long muscly legs in running shorts striding effortlessly made Greta want to jump the kerb in her twenty year old Volvo station wagon and mow the slut down. Instead she pulled over and sobbed her heart out, the knife inside cutting even deeper. When Stephen argued that he should have the children for Christmas Day because his sick mother may not live another year, Greta checked with Miriam only to find out Granny was on a cruise to Fiji. She told Stephen he could have the kids for New Year.

But overall, Greta was convincing. When anyone asked, she would say she was 'getting the hang of it,' 'making lemonade out of lemons' and 'starting afresh'.

Surprisingly, people were fooled by this veneer that masked the lava of boiling rage under her skin. People are actually quite stupid, Greta thought.

The main puzzle was how to attract a hit-man. She had read the book twice but it didn't cover this particular subject. There was plenty about money, finding the perfect partner and losing weight, nothing about a contract killer. She thought about asking the divorced mothers at school, but decided if they knew any hit-men they would have already employed them. She saw their sheepish ex-partners picking up kids on the Wednesday afternoons, when Stephen would send her a last-minute text saying he couldn't have the kids this week, and she would have to leave work early again.

Greta decided she needed help visualising assassins and borrowed the entire library of Quentin Tarantino movies from the local video store. She watched them all with Thomas, the week he was suspended for sending a virus to the school's computers. At the start, she had to cover her eyes, until she pretended that all the victims were Stephen, which was much jollier, and she started cheering as the death count rose.

The day after they watched *Reservoir Dogs*, Greta found a flyer with 'THE EXTERMINATORS - no job too big or too small' in her letter box. It was a sign. She

rang them from a call box three suburbs away, giving an assumed name, but unfortunately some jobs did turn out to be too big and they only meant trapping possums and killing snakes. She didn't bother checking whether their definition of snake included the two-legged kind.

After spending another fortnight of going to sleep every night with images of a besuited long-haired John Travolta in her head and still no result, she wondered if she was being too passive. It required a more do-it-yourself approach. She thought about buying a gun, but decided that was too dangerous with the kids. She checked out her local neighbourhood house for archery classes, but they weren't being run until winter.

It was on New Year's Eve that she found something more practical. *Poisonous Plants - A Guide for Parents & Childcare Providers* in Miriam's bookcase. It was part of Miriam's research when she trying out for a role in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Greta was supposed to be helping Miriam get ready for her soiree of sherry and charades with the leading lights of the Amateur Dramatics Society. Instead, claiming a headache, she left before the guests arrived, Poisonous Plants, a suspicious bulge in her handbag.

Matt, at the 'Touch of Grass' Garden Centre, had tanned olive skin and beautiful blue eyes, but Greta

only noticed his hands. Strong, they could strangle an ex-husband efficiently. She had arrived with a shopping list including hemlock, nightshade, rhubarb leaves and daffodil bulbs, the latter two being poisonous as well as camouflage, she schemed. Matt thought Greta was lovely and did his best to engage her in conversation. Being a shy man, he kept it about the plants, pointing out to her the start of a scorchingly hot summer wasn't the best time to begin planting but that he appreciated her interesting choices. 'And don't worry about them being poisonous,' he said, smiling at her. 'Almost impossible to poison anyone with plants. They taste so awful that people won't eat enough to kill them.'

Greta was so depressed that when he offered her a spot in the 'paint a pair of terracotta gumboots' workshop the next Saturday for free, in the hope to see her again, she actually accepted. Delighted, Matt took down her phone details.

He rang her mobile the following week, to confirm her attendance and just to say hello, while Miriam was sitting in the kitchen. Greta was surprised. She had already moved on to thoughts of cutting Stephen's car brakes. Miriam, sneaking into the living room to eavesdrop on the conversation, noticed her copy of *Poisonous Plants* sitting on the coffee table. She was

already suspicious after Greta's early exit on New Year's Eve.

'No, of course. I'm really looking forward to it,' Greta said and put down the phone.

'What was that about?' Miriam asked, brandishing her book.

'The guy from the Garden Centre. I'm going there for a course on Saturday.'

'About plants?' asked Miriam.

'Terracotta boots, actually. Oh, you found your book. I meant to return it to you.'

'But why did you want it?' Miriam persisted.

'Someone at work, worried about their garden. Kids, you know,' Greta lied. 'Turned out to be harmless. Apparently, it's almost impossible to be poisoned from a plant.'

Greta thought she had explained everything away. But Miriam, who had noted a chemistry kit (actually Thomas's), a leaflet on how to get your gun licence (plan abandoned some time ago), as well as several large knives that had been resharpened by the butcher (just in case she felt like sticking a real knife into his heart), wasn't convinced.

The workshop fell on a child-free weekend, and Greta, having spent the morning visualising death in

general, decided to go. The only other attendee was a small bird-like woman, with large glasses and an unattractive helmet of grey hair that didn't suit her. A lawyer, Greta guessed, or possibly a human resources manager. The terracotta gumboots were not even full-sized ones for sticking plants in, as Greta had imagined, which was disappointing, because she could imagine smashing Stephen's skull with it. Rather, they were small dinky ones for keeping pencils in. Would be hard to squash a mouse with one, Greta thought.

Matt got out the paints.

'I don't normally run the craft courses, but Margie's on holidays,' he explained to Greta, who was only half-listening, caught up with the sudden thought of death by fertiliser. 'I'll bring in some of my homemade rock cakes for you shortly.' Matt had got up extra early to make them that morning.

'Probably taking credit for his wife's work,' Greta said grumpily to the other woman, when Matt left the room.

'She's dead,' the woman said. 'Two years ago, this March.'

Embarrassed, Greta sat down at the table and pretended to be interested in brush selection.

'I'm... Zoe,' the woman said. 'I think I'll do daisies.'

Greta decided her pair would be black to match her mood and began to paint in thick impatient strokes.

'Are you only using black?' Zoe asked, raising an eyebrow.

'For my teenager,' Greta said, and then to change the conversation, 'Have you been to many of these courses?'

'First one,' Zoe replied. 'Don't go in for hobbies. Bit of a workaholic.'

'What sort of work do you do?' Bet it's librarian, Greta thought.

'I'm a marriage termination consultant. Actually, that's where I met Matt. Ex-client.' Zoe glided her paintbrush over the terracotta, trailing a glistening sky blue.

'You said Matt's wife....' Greta began, and then with a sudden flash, she realised that at last the universe had finally responded to her creative awareness and brought to her what she had been seeking. Her very own hit-man. True, it was a woman, a woman who looked like a bookkeeper but that didn't matter. She must action this and determine her destiny.

Drinking tea and eating Matt's delicious cakes, Greta did her best to convince Zoe to take on the assignment. Zoe didn't usually get involved in killing ex-spouses. 'I tend to see people for whom divorce is not a solution.' But, eventually, she was prepared to make an exception

in Greta's case, after Greta explained in detail what a bastard Stephen was.

'Do you want a quick clean kill?' Zoe asked. 'Or are you looking for more of a slow burn?'

Greta was torn. 'What does that entail?'

Zoe, pressing a finger against the boot to be sure the blue had dried, dipped her brush into the white and began making delicate petals. 'Do you want him utterly destroyed? The business wrecked, personal life ruined, and then we kill him. It's a choice between the three minute country song or the entire opera.'

'Is there a difference in price?' asked Greta.

'More expensive. But I don't ask for anything upfront. Strictly payment on delivery.'

That sold Greta. She had coped with a gigantic legal bill. Somehow she would manage this. 'I want him destroyed, as if he never existed in the first place,' she told Zoe. But then an afterthought, 'The kids are supposed to be with him Wednesdays and every second weekend, so it can't be then.'

'Of course,' Zoe smiled, displaying a set of perfect and expensive teeth. And they spent the rest of their time happily painting their terracotta boots, in companionable silence.

It wasn't until they were getting ready to leave, that Greta asked, 'Should I give you my details? Stephen's details? Do we need to meet again?'

'This isn't the sort of industry where you exchange business cards or get a receipt,' said Zoe. 'I'll be in contact when we have a result. Don't get in touch with me and not a word to anyone.'

Matt came to say goodbye with a pot of violets. 'To celebrate the New Year.' He shyly presented it to Greta. 'We were all out of hemlock.'

'Thanks,' said Greta, who felt like a new woman, and when she took the pot, she noticed Matt's eyes, as he pressed her hand for a heart-beat longer than necessary.

'Actually,' said Matt, 'I was just wondering whether you'd like to go out for a drink sometime. If you're not busy, that is...'

Greta hadn't been asked out on a date for over twenty years, but the first flicker of excitement was doused when she remembered what had happened to his first wife, and she stood there trying to find the words to say no.

'Greta would love to,' Zoe said briskly and Matt brightened and coloured all at once. 'Fantastic. Great. I'll be in touch. Better get back to the customers. Thanks Greta. Thanks Nora.'

Greta was too distracted to notice that Matt had called Zoe the wrong name.

‘Sorry for jumping in like that,’ said Zoe. ‘But you had to say yes.’

‘He killed his wife,’ said Greta.

‘You want to kill your husband,’ said Zoe, in a beggars can’t be choosers kind of way. ‘And really I killed his first wife. You’ll be perfectly safe. It’s a one-off service. To lose one wife may be regarded as misfortune; to lose both...’

‘Looks like carelessness,’ said Greta anxiously, who knew the quote because Miriam had been Lady Bracknell’s understudy in *The Importance of Being Ernest* two years earlier.

‘I was thinking of suspicious. Matt is lovely. Don’t mention his wife to him. I shouldn’t have breached client confidentiality. Forget Stephen. Before you know it he will have vanished from your life.’

And so Greta got on with her life. She threw out the self-help book, as well as the internet searches on explosives and electrocutions. She did go out for a drink with Matt. It went very well. The divorced mothers were at the same bar, and when Matt wasn’t looking, Debbie (*husband kicked out when she discovered he had been sending naked pictures of himself on-line to a seventeen year old in*

*Latvia*) had given her a big thumbs up and then sent over two ‘Orgasm’ cocktails for a joke. Greta asked Matt to the movies the next week, and surprised them both when she invited him to stay the night.

She waited for a progress report from Zoe and quizzed the children when they returned from staying with their father, if he seemed any different. Thomas mentioned that Dad and Nina were fighting a lot. ‘Well, it’s a start,’ she thought.

Six weeks later, Stephen suddenly appeared on her doorstep. Greta hadn’t spoken to him since the day of their divorce. He needed to get some business documents from the basement, he told her. She let him in, after quickly checking that Zoe wasn’t lurking in the bushes getting ready to shoot him.

Half an hour later, she stood on the doorstep, as he stuffed three cardboard boxes full of paper into his ridiculous sports car.

‘If anyone rings up from the Security Commission, refer them to my lawyer,’ he said, walking up the steps towards her. He didn’t bother to explain or let her ask questions. Instead he ordered her about as if they were still married.

Greta said nothing, but put a mental tick against ‘business, wrecked.’

‘Nina’s gone, you know. Said I was too old and boring and apparently she is a lesbian. I’ll have to give up that flat. Too expensive.’

It was their longest conversation since the day he told her he was leaving. Greta wondered if he was expecting her to be sympathetic, offer a cup of tea.

‘Thought I could kip here for a bit. Business is slow. Cash flow issues. Nothing serious, just this high Australian dollar. Would only be for a few weeks.’ He gave her a smile as if he was doing her a favour. And she waited for him to say it was all a mistake and he had been a fool and it would never happen again. But he didn’t say any of that, because he was convinced he didn’t have to. Instead he was thinking about whether he could move in by Friday and advertise the flat by the weekend.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Greta.

‘Why not? This is my house,’ he shouted.

‘No, it’s my house, and you are too old and boring,’ and she shut the door in his face.

On Saturday afternoon, as Stephen began looking at on-line ads for bedsits, Greta took Matt to see Miriam in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It was Matt who noticed her, part way through the first Act. ‘Isn’t that Nora who painted those boots with you?’ He pointed at Blanche duBois.

Greta looked at the small blonde woman who had just stepped off the street car.

‘Don’t you mean Zoe?’ she whispered back. The lady in the seat in front of them turned and frowned while Matt shook his head and placed his hand on Greta’s thigh and gave it a squeeze. Looking up at the stage, Greta mentally added a grey wig and glasses to Blanche. It was definitely Zoe. For the first half, Greta sat there delighted. She could go backstage to see Miriam and casually meet up with Zoe. No one would be suspicious. Congratulate her on the work done so far, ask when the job might be ‘finalised’.

But at the start of the second act she began to have doubts. Why did Matt think her name was Nora? What was she doing in Miriam’s play? Hadn’t Zoe told her that she was a workaholic with no hobbies. Greta looked at her program. Squinting in the dark, she found a photo of Zoe smiling with her perfect teeth. Underneath, she could just make out ‘Blanche DuBois is played by Nora Massey. Nora is a dental hygenist and veteran of many of our productions, having starring roles in...’. A long list followed. By the time Miriam came on stage for her blink and you’d miss it moment at the end of the second half, Greta’s suspicions had been aroused.

'It was pretty good,' said Matt, after the applause died down.

Greta said nothing.

'Is everything alright? You're looking a little peaky.'

Greta turned to face him. 'Matt, how did your first wife die?'

She had never asked him about his first wife before, obeying Zoe's rule about not discussing it with him.

'My ex-wife?' Matt said.

'Yes,' said Greta.

'But she isn't dead,' said Matt. 'She lives in Bonnie Doon. Left me for a ski instructor. She never really understood plants.'

Greta closed her eyes, trying desperately hard to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

'You don't look well,' said Matt. 'Here's Miriam. She'll stay with you and I'll get the car.'

'Did you enjoy it?' Miriam asked, walking up the aisle, with her stage makeup still on. 'I actually forgot my last line, did you notice?'

'You know,' said Greta slowly, 'I've met the woman who played Blanche.'

Miriam's face became oddly defiant as she sat in the chair next to Greta.

'Really?'

'Except she called herself Zoe.'

'Nora is a born actress,' Miriam said. 'Will play any part.'

Greta had a sinking feeling that once again, she was almost the last person to realise what was going on.

Miriam, sensing Greta's distress, decided to confess. 'Alright, it was my idea.'

Greta could feel herself becoming tearful. 'Stephen isn't going to die?'

'He will someday,' said Miriam, putting her arm around her. 'But, Nora isn't going to kill him, if that's what you mean.'

'And you knew all along.'

'I was concerned about what you might do,' said Miriam. 'You weren't yourself and then bloody Nora didn't stick to the script. She was supposed to turn you down and put you off the idea for good. I could have killed her. You're not very disappointed are you?'

Before Greta could answer, Matt walked back into the auditorium. Matt with the beautiful blue eyes who had planted an entire poison garden in her backyard, because he thought she'd like it. Matt with the strong hands who had made her bloom in areas that had always been arid desert with Stephen. Matt who hadn't organised to have his wife murdered. And the knife

inside her suddenly splintered and dissolved. In a way, Stephen had vanished from her life. Taking a deep breath, she hugged Miriam. As she left, holding hands with Matt, Greta realised that, without giving it any attention at all, the universe had become exactly what she had wanted.

## **Aoife Clifford**

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