



Heshouldn't have stolen 24 years of my life. I regret ever meeting him

Tina Mitchell advises other women to listen to their gut instinct. Photo: David Conachy



Tina Mitchell tells Niamh Horan her side of the story after the high-profile break-up of her marriage to singer Tommy Fleming

Tina Mitchell is sitting in the kitchen of her picture-perfect home, trying to pinpoint the first time she suspected something was wrong. For years, she questioned her husband's sexuality. "I know now my gut was screaming at me and I think part of me realises that I didn't want to hear it," she says. What she didn't want to hear was that her husband of more than two decades, the singer Tommy Fleming, was gay and living a complicated secret life.

When we meet at her home in Sligo, it is just days after Tommy went on the national airwaves to tell the country that he had known he was gay since he was 13.

He may have known, but Tina didn't. How was that possible? "The wife is always the last to know," she says.

Since the break-up of their marriage, Tina, now 62, has reverted to her maiden name of Mitchell. Today, she wants to tell her side of the story and explain why the truth evaded her for so long. And she wants to set the record, as she sees it, straight.

The ordeal has taken its toll on her both physically and mentally, she says. Tina has lost a lot of weight since their split last year and looks a shadow of the woman who previously appeared happy and in love alongside her husband in glossy magazines.

"I've lost two stone. I have lost my confidence and I have lost my mind. I cannot face anybody. I don't think I'd be here today if it wasn't for my family and friends," she says.

Her hands shake as we speak. Her wedding ring has been removed.

Photos of Tommy that were dotted around the house have been removed from display, as she says they became too painful to look at. "I feel completely broken," she says.

Her hurt and anger have nothing to do with Tommy's sexuality. "It doesn't matter whether he was bisexual, straight, gay or whatever he was when he met me — he knew, so he should not have married me."

"He shouldn't have stolen 24 years of my life. I regret ever meeting him. I regret the 24 years that I've wasted. I could have been in a completely different situation in my life."

"I regret all of the decisions I've made, all of them that have a huge impact for the rest of my days on all of us. I regret putting my best years into excelling his career. I should have been looking at retirement and planning for that, and I have nothing now."

The couple met in 2002. Tina was working as a successful sales manager at a local radio station when she met Tommy at the funeral of a mutual friend.

"He sat into the seat beside me. I'd

never had a conversation with him before. I'd seen him coming in and out of the radio station, but he didn't register much with me," she says.

"Afterwards, we went to the reception and spent the day together and connected. We talked and laughed and exchanged phone numbers."

In those first months, Tina says Tommy "completely overwhelmed me. He idolised me; he put me on a pedestal and told me how much he loved me. I was absolutely swept off my feet."

Tina had her own home when she met Tommy, which she built in 1988, and still lives in today.

She says that she was "very careful in the beginning" not to rush into a serious relationship "because I didn't want a commitment".

Her first marriage, from which she had two children, had ended in 1997 after seven years.

Early in her relationship with Tommy, she says, there were some doubts. "I knew something wasn't right and I suspected he was having an affair. I just knew by his behaviour. He was on the phone a lot..."

One day, Tina heard a voicemail that unsettled her: "There was a voice message from a man on his phone to say 'we must meet up' and I questioned it."

I wonder what it was about the message that worried her. "It was the way it was worded that just made me feel a bit uncomfortable."

Tina challenged Tommy, and was convinced by him that there was nothing to worry about. "He absolutely denied and denied: 'How could I even think that? There was no way.' He was so committed to me."

But, she says, he did admit he had a cocaine addiction very early on, which she felt explained his secretive behaviour.

Last week, Tommy admitted on radio, in an interview with Ciara Kelly on Newstalk, that he had self-medicated for some time using alcohol, prescription drugs and illegal substances.

As far back as 23 years ago, she pledged to help him.

"I said, 'OK, we can fix this'. We went about finding out how to get help for his drug habit. I couldn't have him in the house with the drug habit and two small kids, so he went and had treatment, which I paid for."

Looking back, she says this was a "red flag" that she should have heeded. "I should have run at that point but I felt, as a duty of care to the relationship, that I would help fight the battle with him — and that's exactly what I did."

When Tommy emerged from treatment in 2003, there were happy times again. In 2004, they got engaged in Cape Town and in October 2006 they married in Clifden, Co Galway.

Tina was now his full-time manager, dedicating herself to his career. A black grand piano stands in the kitchen they shared, a symbol of how their whole family life revolved around his music.

By the mid-2000s, Tommy hit the commercial big-time in his *Voice of Hope* era. There was a live recording from Knock Shrine, which became hugely successful and was broadcast on PBS in America, raising his international profile.

But cracks were beginning to emerge. "These were obviously my suspicions that he was cheating," says Tina. "I would ask him questions about what was happening when he was away on tour, but I kept getting reassured about how much he was devoted to me and how much he loved me."

I put Tommy's claim to Tina — made during his interview with Ciara Kelly — that he told Tina he had a relationship with a man for six months before they met and Tina knew he was bisexual.

Today, Tina vehemently denies Tommy's version of events.

Did you have that conversation? "No."

Did he tell you, 'I'm bisexual'? "That didn't happen. I did not know."

She says that several years ago she found the gay male dating app Grindr on Tommy's phone. When she challenged him, he told her a gay relative had told him that "somebody had put a profile up on Grindr with his picture and he went on Grindr to remove it and to see what it was."

She says there was always a plausible excuse, and he was "pleading and begging [saying] 'I love you, I'm devoted to you. You know I'm committed to this, I'm so in love with you, I cannot function without you'."

Their life together began to unravel in October 2023, the month Tina turned 60 and when Tommy went on tour to Australia for six weeks.

Tina explains that they shared an iCloud account for business purposes, which meant their text messages were connected to the shared account, unless one person decided to switch it off.

"He arrived in Australia and was only there a day when a text message



Tommy and Tina in 2022. Photo: Tony Gavin

came to me that was meant for him. It was from a guy to say he was just up the road from where Tommy was staying. I checked the man's profile and his photograph was taken at Gay Pride in Sydney. My stomach did a somersault. I texted him back and asked, 'Who is this?'"

Within minutes, Tommy called her "in a panic", she claims.

"He asked is everything all right? Because he was made aware that I knew the message had come in. He went into denial mode when I challenged him."

Tina claims they had sexual relations up until around 2020 and slept in the same bed until September and last year. Tommy, who did not wish to respond to queries put to him by the *Sunday Independent*, insisted on radio that he did not put Tina at risk through other sexual encounters.

It wasn't until September 16 last year that Tina says matters finally came to a head. Tommy left the house after a row. Tina's daughter Rebecca, known as 'Becky', went to speak to Tommy, who had moved out of the house at that stage.

"Becky asked him straight out, 'Are you gay?'. And his answer was, 'I

might be bisexual'. "He arrived back here the following day and said we needed to talk. I said: 'There's no talking, we're done, please leave.' He said: 'This is all a mistake, this is a complete misunderstanding, and I'm not going to be put down for something I did not do.'"

A few days later, Tommy attempted to take his own life.

After leaving hospital, he went back to work until mid-October — performing at The Marty Party in Spain hosted by RTE's Marty Morrissey, among other engagements — before he eventually agreed to be admitted to St Patrick's Hospital.

After his suicide attempt, Tina said: "He cried when he was leaving, and Becky and I hugged him and we told him we loved him and that we would do anything to support him."

But some time later, she sat down and went through the Google history on their shared iCloud account. There, she says, she found years of Google history that left her devastated.

"I thought I was in the middle of a breakdown. I thought my head was going to explode," she said. "My heart was thumping in my chest. I couldn't eat. I was getting up every morning after not sleeping any night, violently ill. I couldn't keep food in me. I couldn't function. I couldn't have a conversation or go outside the door. I was completely traumatised."

She decided to record a phone conversation with her husband to ask him about his behaviour. She says she did so because she felt no one would believe her version of events and what she had experienced over the years.

But the conversation was leaked online.

Several years ago, Tina found the gay male dating app Grindr on Tommy's phone

The singer said the phone call in question was made while he was in St Patrick's and that it was recorded without his knowledge. He said he does not remember the phone conversation taking place.

When asked to address this, Tina said: "We recorded him because we were at the end of our tether with being ignored and getting lies after lies after lies. We knew that nobody would believe us. That call is now six months old. When that call was done, I was in a state that I didn't know my own mind."

"I thought I was going mad. I couldn't believe that somebody that's supposed to love you could actually do this. The realisation was coming hot and fast, the more we found out. So, I shared that call with my family and I shared it with some of my close friends because there's no way on earth I could even explain it."

She never wanted the call to be shared widely or for Tommy's sexuality to become public and claims she had asked for a "confidentiality clause" in their separation.

She wants to tell other women who suspect their husband is gay to listen to their gut instinct.

"The first thing I'd say to them is there is help, so don't worry about that," she says. "But if your gut is telling you something's not right, then listen to your gut, because I didn't listen to mine and I have lost everything." She has now written over 300 pages of her experience that she hopes may become a book.

Towards the end of our conversation, her daughter Becky (32) comes into the house.

Becky got married last August and says she should have been celebrating the "honeymoon" phase of her new life, but instead is dealing with the fallout of her family being torn apart.

"It's been hell for the last eight months," she says. "My mum is a very strong woman and it's not something that I ever expected her to have to go through in her life. We're a very close family and we all protect each other and look out for each other. It's been difficult to see her so broken and so hurt."

What would she like to say to Tommy? "He knows the truth, he knows what is destroyed. I would tell him to do the right thing and just let us move on peacefully with our lives. Let Mum have a new chapter of her life where she can be free and move on peacefully."

"I know he spoke about being free. He has his career, he has a business where he can start again, as he says, but we don't have that. We have to live with this now for the rest of our lives and pick up the pieces."

"My mum needs to feel a sense of security that she has her home and it's not going to be taken away, because everything else has been taken away — her career and her life — and she deserves to have peace now. We all do. We all just want to wake up and have a normal day."

"But I know that's not going to happen for probably a long time."

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