

"I have to remember it is not love that has hurt me; but someone who could not love me in the right way." R. YS Perez, I Hope You Fall in Love: Poetry Collection

I.
September 29, 1809

Claire Denham was certain her arithmetic was correct. She had not needed to reach for the rags in her bottom drawer for six weeks. She was two weeks past when she had expected her monthly courses.

Claire felt a warm sense of fulfilment, bliss, as she stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom, the same room that she had once shared with both of her elder sisters. Though her stomach was still quite flat, and no one would ever guess that she was with child, she cradled her stomach protectively, knowing that she was carrying Arthur Slickson's precious son or daughter.

She could picture the beautiful child in her head. Of course, any child of Arthur's would be beautiful. Blond curls and green eyes, of course. She hoped their child did not inherit her features. A son would be tall, handsome and noble, a true gentleman. A daughter would be beautiful, elegant, and clever. She prayed the little child within her became exactly like their wonderful father.

Claire watched as colour filled her cheeks and tears filled her eyes. Lord, this had to be it! The time was finally here.

"Oh," she whispered excitedly, cupping her own cheeks as she smiled at herself. "Oh, happy day."

This coming November would mark three years. Three years since Claire and Arthur had entered into a secret courtship. It had to be kept secret as Arthur's mother was very particular about the ladies her son spent his time with. Despite her own social standing being raised with the elevation of Grace to duchess, Claire still lacked fortune. She now certainly had connections, but marriage to her would not bring land or dowry.

Arthur had told Claire as much when he persuaded her to keep their courtship quiet. Surprising his mother would not yield anything but a scandal and he would need time to encourage her towards the idea Claire.

In the meantime, both she and Arthur devised convincing cover stories for their families so that they could spend time with one another. Claire had told her mother that she had an interest in painting now that they had money enough to afford a maid to help with the household chores. Of course, Claire had no interest in painting, and had to produce an artwork every few months to keep up the ruse.

Mrs Denham always praised her, even though Claire was certain they both knew she was terrible.

Arthur Slickson had given Claire her very first kiss at the winter assembly and took pleasure in kissing her whenever he could. He had often chuckled at Claire's innocence and inexperience in the beginning, but Claire had learned, and she enjoyed feeling desired whenever Arthur's eyes found her.

Claire had thought that she loved Arthur before, but those had been the feelings of a girl. She had fallen deeply, passionately in love with Arthur during their courtship, and Arthur felt the same way about her. It was because he loved her that he kept their meetings secret. He pleased his mother by dancing with rich ladies at balls and assemblies in order to keep her on side, so that she would eventually approve of Claire. Claire had grown out of jealousy and knew that nothing could come between them. With every kiss, with every touch, Arthur told Claire that he loved her.

Arthur had told Claire about the deeper intimacies of love, and how two people showed one another their affection. Claire wanted to make sure that Arthur knew exactly what was in her heart, and a few months of suggesting on Arthur's part, Claire had finally agreed.

Arthur had been subtly working on his mother for three years now. With a child on the way, their engagement would be announced any day now ... once Claire told him, of course. Mrs Slickson would understand. When she learned that she and Arthur had been courting for three years, she would see how much they loved one another. She was going to be a grandmother. This was a happy occasion!

Claire nearly jumped out of her skin when there was a loud knock on her door.

"Claire, are you getting ready?" her mother called through the door. "We are to depart soon."

Claire wiped her eyes but could not wipe away her smile. She could not go to Ashwood House just yet. Arthur had to know about her pregnancy. They were due to meet up soon anyway. "I thought I might get a little painting in first, Mama!" Claire called back. "The light is just lovely ..." Her heart suddenly stopped as she looked out the window and prayed for sunshine. God was on her side thankfully, as there was some autumn sun shining.

"What?" cried Mrs Denham. "Claire, this is not an ordinary party. It is Perrie's birthday!"

Claire couldn't help but nearly burst into happy tears again. Oh, Perrie was going to have another little cousin. She, Kate and Grace would all be mothers! Claire had always looked up to and admired her older sisters. Kate had been the first to marry for love, and how Jim Ellis adored her. And Grace had always been meant for Adam Beresford, no matter the obstacles they needed to jump between meeting in the schoolroom and meeting at the altar.

Just like her sisters, she was going to marry a man that adored her, and she would have a family of her own. She had thrown her sisters off the scent a few years ago and had been much better at hiding her affection for Arthur. Grace especially would understand now. She would understand that Arthur was her Adam.

"I will be along, Mama!" Claire promised. "I cannot go so such weather! Winter will be dreadful for light. I won't be too far behind you. I shall walk. The exercise will do me well." Indeed, Mrs Denham would not know how well. Just yet, anyway.

She heard Mrs Denham sigh outside her door, but she did not protest. Claire had no plans to miss Perrie's second birthday. She knew it was a bit of a gathering, and Grace had spent a long while planning it. It was the setting of Jack Beresford's return, after all. Grace hoped that a large community of guests would provide Jack with enough cover to protect him from any harsh comments from his mother and he would feel welcome enough to remain at Ashwood House.

Claire could only recall a few details of Jack Beresford. They had danced once, but most of her attention had been on Arthur. She did not really remember if they had spoken. Of course, they were both in attendance at Grace and Adam's wedding, but he had been quiet and melancholy, understandably so, so soon after his father's death. Those were her only two encounters with the man.

Claire dressed herself in white, which was Arthur's favourite colour on her. She combed, fluffed, and pinned her hair, and listened out for the door and the sound of the carriage for when her family left for Ashwood House.

When they were safely away and she was satisfied with her appearance, Claire stole out of the house, too. During this time, Claire had become an expert in moving as clandestinely as possible. She knew the wood paths expertly and found her way quickly to the mossy clearing that had come to be known as their spot.

Claire's heart was beating quickly, and she felt a fluttering of nerves in the pit of her stomach. But they eased immediately when she saw Arthur leaning against a tree as he waited for her. Claire skipped into a run as she raced over to him, jumping into his arms as soon as she was close enough.

Arthur squeezed Claire tightly, pulling apart just enough to press his lips to hers hard. "I thought you might stand me up for the party," he murmured. His green eyes suddenly darkened, and Claire knew his expression of desire. "But does this mean your mother's house is empty?" He arched an eyebrow curiously.

Her cheeks still reddened after all this time. "I am to follow soon," she replied so lightly. "It is my niece's birthday, after all."

Arthur pouted. "No," he urged. "Such an opportunity should not be wasted. Don't you love me?"

Claire's heart sank. "Of course!" she exclaimed, latching onto the labels of his coat. "Of course, I do. How could you doubt it?"

Arthur frowned and sucked in a breath. "I can't help it sometimes. I need to be shown."

As much as his insecurities hurt her, Claire would silence them with her news. "Arthur, please. I have something wonderful to tell you."

His interest was sparked immediately. "Oh?"

"This can all stop," she told him excitedly. "The lying, the sneaking about. We can finally be together properly Arthur ... I am going to have a child."

Claire's smile was so wide it hurt her cheeks. Only it started to fade as she watched Arthur's reaction.

She had never seen someone turn physically purple before, and yet Arthur's contorting face was doing just that. Shock and anger flashed across his face so quickly, so interchangeably, that Claire needed to take a step back from him. What on earth was he doing?

"What?" spat Arthur, finally finding his tongue after a minute.

Claire felt her lower lip tremble, and her arm instinctively went across her stomach protectively. "Well ... well ... aren't you happy?" she worried. "We are going to have a child ... Arthur, we can be married."

Arthur swore, a crude, awful word, and he stormed about ten feet away, holding his head in his hands as he muttered under his breath. Claire was frozen, fear running through her veins as she was certainly going into shock.

Why was Arthur reacting this way? This was happy news! This was what they wanted!

"How can you be certain it is mine?" Arthur suddenly cried, marching back towards her, a cold, cruel look in his eyes that Claire had never seen before.

"Arthur!" she cried hysterically, her eyes welling up. "How could you say such a thing?"

"You opened your legs for me, you could have opened them for anyone," he snapped.

Claire gasped, all blood draining from her face. No, he could not have just said that. "Arthur, stop it!" she begged. "Stop it before you say something you cannot take back! You have said enough! Of course, this child is yours! What did you think would happen? You have wanted to marry me for three years! I know this is a shock, but it will be a blessing, I am certain!"

But Arthur laughed at her. Not a hearty, humorous laugh, but a cold, mocking laugh that made her feel truly terrified of the person who stood before her. "Marry you?" he scoffed. "In what world would I marry you? You took longer to persuade than others, Claire, but you did finally give in. And if you gave in to me, you could have given in to anybody."

Claire could not believe her ears, nor her eyes. Her emotions fogged her mind and made her lose all sense of reality as she fell to her knees. She felt a blinding pain in her chest, as though Arthur had driven in a knife, one cruel word at a time.

Where had this come from? What was he doing? She couldn't understand it, couldn't fathom it! He loved her! He had told her so!

Arthur came to kneel beside her, placing his index finger underneath her chin, forcing her to look into his once beautiful green eyes. "Do you understand me, Claire?" he whispered, his voice sounding almost tender. "Should you publicly name me, I will shame you. And who do you think will come out of the other side smelling like roses? Hmm? The gentleman, or the unwed girl?" He frowned, almost regretfully. "How I will miss you," he uttered, brushing his thumb over her bottom lip.

And as though she didn't matter at all, Arthur left Claire on the grass, utterly and completely heartbroken and in shock at how her life had just imploded. Claire burst into violent sobs that shook her whole body. Her breathing escalated to the point where she was gasping for air in and amongst wailing in pain.

She couldn't understand what had just happened. How had Arthur flipped so suddenly, so cruelly? How could he do that to her when he had repeatedly told her that he loved her? They loved each other! It was a sacred bond! They were meant to be married! They were meant to raise a family together! Just like Grace and Kate, she was going to create a home.

Claire realised, to her devastation, that it was quite impossible for Arthur to be in love with her. One did not destroy their love. He had lied, and that realisation in itself burned her very soul as she cried into the empty clearing.

Claire didn't know for how long she cried. She didn't know what time it was. She felt raw and empty, only she wasn't. She was still with child. A child who, up until now, she had believed would have a devoted and loving father.

Now, this innocent child, would be born to a shamed, unwed mother. It would be a bastard, and Claire would be ruined. Her family would be ruined. Oh, her mother! What would Mrs Denham say? Mrs Denham was so proud of both Grace and Kate, and the families they had made. Claire could not bear the thought of her mother thinking ... her mother knowing...

Claire couldn't stay. She had to run away. People went missing all the time. It would not be difficult to start towards London. It would be easy to disappear in London. She could have the baby and leave it ...

The second the thought crossed her mind, Claire sat up straight, the shock of it bringing her back to earth. She had no idea what she was going to do, but she could not do that. Maybe, maybe this had been a shock to Arthur, too. Well, of course it had! Perhaps, once he'd had enough time to come to terms with it ...

Claire clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle another sob. No. She had been fooled. And she was now left with the consequences. She couldn't run away. And as much as she never wanted to see such an expression of disappointment from her family, she would have to tell them.

Claire rose to her feet, shaking on unsteady legs, and started out towards Ashwood House, feeling frightened, lost, and excruciatingly heartbroken.

Oh, Claire, sweet girl. I literally spent this whole chapter uttering, "Oh, honey no," for each line where she tried to justify that fuckboy. I wish that term existed in 1810!!

Ladies, please promise me that you have better red flag indicators that our poor Claire!!

I wonder where we go from here!!

Thank you so much for all the love already! Whenever I post a new story, I always obsessively refresh it to see the reaction and it makes me so happy to see how excited you all are!!

Vote (like the wonderful people of Pennsylvania & Georgia did!!) and comment xxx