

"A great marriage is not when the 'perfect couple' comes together. It is when an imperfect couple learns to enjoy their differences." Dave Meurer

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Jack's back was throbbing, and he was fairly certain his neck was twisted in some sort of unnatural way. He had to resist groaning with fatigued pain so as not to wake his sleeping wife.

Wife.

That, perhaps, was the first time Jack had ever thought the word in its now correct context. The sleeping woman in his bed was his wife. He had a wife. He was married.

Claire had cried herself to sleep. She had thought she was being quiet, soundless even, but Jack could still hear her staggered breaths. He did not know what to do or say for fear he would make everything worse.

Jack had felt helpless, which was an entirely horrid experience. This whole arrangement was meant to help, and in hearing his new bride sob into the darkness, Jack felt like a cad. But why, when his only sin was that he was not the impudent blackguard who had compromised her so dishonourably in the first place. How could such a man have so blindly fooled Claire? Jack knew that were he ever to have a daughter, she would be so fiercely under his protection that she would never be so naïve.

Eventually she had stopped crying, and Jack had learned something he hadn't known about his wife. Claire snored. Jack wondered if she knew this. When she fell into a deep sleep sometime a er midnight, so, , breathy snores reached him across the room.

In lying awake on the sofa, listening to Claire's attempts to soothe herself, Jack naturally began to have second thoughts about what had transpired. Perhaps this wasn't the solution. Perhaps Claire ought to have been sent abroad to a school somewhere for ladies to become accomplished debs. The sorts of places which discreetly covered themselves as institutions for girls in Claire's position. The child could be taken in by a couple in the country, and no-one need ever know. Ought that not better than to be miserable with a husband she clearly had absolutely no regard for.

Jack had very quickly learned during his sleepless night that such a union would not satisfy him. He would give her time, of course, but he wanted action and regard. Claire was the woman he had married, and of course he would do right by her and the child, his child, now. But if she couldn't love him ... well, he'd endured enough in his life to know that he would go out and seek regard.

As so o en he had done in the past as his reputation proceeded him.

Jack rose up o of the settee and stretched his arms, before twisting his torso back and forth, determined to try and click his back into place. He heard a few satisfying pops in his bones, before he yawned with exhaustion.

Jack quickly pulled on his breeches that he had discarded the night before and changed into a fresh linen shirt from the wardrobe. He walked quietly toward the bed, intending to wake Claire, but he found himself pausing at the foot of the bed.

Gone was the look of apprehension and worry from her face. Her pale skin was flawless. Her dark hair had come loose from the plait she had fixed, and it was now in disarray across the pillow. It was natural and beautiful, and Jack quietly acknowledged that he enjoyed Claire's hair down. Her pink lips were parted in thanks to her snoring, and her small hands were supporting the underside of her cheek.

Lord, Jack knew that he could love her well in time. Perhaps he had known it from the first time he saw her at the ball. What luck it had been that the first woman he had seen in an e ort to spite his mother had been Claire Denham. She had been there, safely tucked away in the back of his mind, for all this time.

To be worthy of her, Jack knew that he had to improve himself. He was not a saint and had little to show for his excellent education and incomparable connections. But if he tried, would she notice? Or would it all be for nought? Would her heart always be lost to Slickson?

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden knock at the door, one which woke Claire up with a start. She sat upright in the bed with a gasp, peering questioningly as Jack for a second, before her startled gaze went to the door.

"Get in!" hissed Claire, throwing back the bedclothes on the other side of the bed.

But Jack immediately ran to the settee, seizing the linens and pillow he had taken the night before and raced with them back to the bed. He threw the sheet across the foot of the bed before tossing the pillow at the head, diving underneath the covers to sit beside Claire.

Claire surprised him as she moved closer to him, almost resting her head on his chest as she did. Jack hoped she could not hear his thundering heart.

"Yes?" Jack called out.

The door was opened, and a housemaid entered, curtsying, before she was followed in by Mrs Hayes carrying a large breakfast tray. The housemaid began to open the drapes as Mrs Hayes brought the tray over to the bed, setting down at the foot.

"Good morning, milord, milady," greeted Mrs Hayes, as she curtsyed before them.

Jack immediately knew something was not right. Never in his six and twenty years had Mrs Hayes called him 'milord'. He has been John for the briefest of moments before Miss Hayes, when she was his nanny, had decided that such a name was far too formal for a one-year-old. She had been the one to call him Jack, and the name had become his far more than John had ever been.

"Good morning, Mrs Hayes," replied Claire with a nervous smile.

"What a treat. I have never had breakfast served to me thus before."

Mrs Hayes o ered Claire a genuine smile. "You ought to get used to it, my dear. You are married now. You will have a maid, and your breakfast will be brought to you each morning upon your return from your honeymoon journey."

"But surely it is not your responsibility to serve breakfast, Mrs Hayes," said Jack reservedly, eyeing the housemaid who was now tending to the fire. "I am certain you have far better things to be tending to."

Mrs Hayes smiled sweetly, her eyes crinkling. "Oh, no, I thought this my only opportunity to see the newlyweds," she replied, "owing the fact I was not invited to the ceremony, of course."

There it was, and what an oversight indeed. For a lot of his childhood, Miss Hayes, as she was then, would o en have been the only one to o er Jack a kind word in a day. Any action he received was from her, and such was the case for Adam and Susanna both. They all loved Mrs Hayes, and in the haste of the occasion, Jack had neglected her.

Claire looked between Mrs Hayes and Jack with an expression of admonishment. "Oh, dear, Mrs Hayes, please understand there was no o ense meant," she apologised on Jack's behalf. "Everything was so quick, and Jack -"

"I'm sorry," Jack interrupted, apologising sincerely. "You know I would never neglect you on purpose."

Mrs Hayes seemed to accept his apology, and smiled, though this time, she did not appear as though she were about to scold him as though he were five. "No matter," she replied. "I wanted to o er you both my heartiest congratulations. No one is more deserving of a sweet match than Jack. You will take care of my boy, won't you, milady?"

"My boy?" Jack repeated with a groan. "Mrs Hayes, I could scold you, you know."

"And I could tell your new wife that I used to wipe your bottom now, young man," retorted Mrs Hayes.

Claire giggled her musical laugh. "I will do my best, Mrs Hayes," she assured her, placing her hand on top of Jack's.

Jack had not been expecting her touch and had so reacted as Claire did whenever he touched her. Mrs Hayes frowned momentarily before dismissing whatever thought crossed her mind.

"Everything is ready for you both to depart later this morning. But for now, enjoy your breakfast. Come, Martha," Mrs Hayes beckoned, before they both curtsyed and le them alone in the bedroom.

As soon as the door was closed, both Jack and Claire burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. They were turned to one another, thoroughly enjoying the expression of pure amusement on the other's face for a moment.

When Claire laughed as hard as she was, her blue eyes squinted, and her nose crinkled in a truly adorable way. Jack rested his head back on the pillows hugging an arm across his now aching stomach. Claire did the same thing.

"Grace told me Mrs Hayes was once nanny to you and your siblings." Claire's voice was almost a wheeze.

"Yes, she was," confirmed Jack. "She was so indispensable that once Susanna was grown, my parents kept her on as our housekeeper. Truly, we three are grateful, as it would have been terrible to lose her. She ... well, she loves us."

"She loves you well indeed," agreed Claire. "I do feel awful now that no one thought to invite her, even if it was not a true wedding."

"It was a true wedding, Claire," Jack replied quietly. His tone silenced Claire, and that was not his intention. He had been enjoying their momentary ease in conversation. He needed to change the subject.

"Did you know that Mrs Hayes was the one to call me 'Jack' in the first place?" he asked.

"No," replied Claire. "Though I am sorry for muddling your names. I think the name 'Edward' startled me. It was my father's name, did you know?"

Jack chuckled. "What does it matter? I have too many names anyway. Susanna has three middle names. I pity her husband one day having to stumble over Susanna Augusta Theodosia Euphemia before finally reaching her surname."

Claire laughed, and Jack smiled at his triumph. "My!" she exclaimed. "I feel awfully boring now with plain, old Frances."

"I think the mamas that my mother associates with have a competition of who can gi their children the most ridiculous of names. The longer, the grander, the more syllables, the more splendid."

He watched as Claire momentarily placed her hand on her stomach and uttered, "I wonder what ..." before she stopped herself.

Jack didn't want Claire to be reluctant to discuss such matters with him for fear it would o end him. So, he finished her sentence. "What we might name the child?" he surmised.

Claire's blue eyes flashed to his as she nodded. "Would ... would he or she need such a name?" she asked tentatively.

Claire's face had fallen again, and Jack knew it would take a great deal of time for her to stop feeling unease in his presence.

"No," replied Jack simply. "We may choose whatever we like. Do you have something in mind?"

Claire shook her head, though Jack could see the falsehood in her eyes.

"I thought we agreed never to lie," he murmured.

Claire bit down on her lip. "Oh, but this one will make you hate me," she worried under her breath.

Jack surprised Claire, catching the underside of her chin gently and pulling her gaze to his. "I could never hate you," he promised her.

"Tell me."

Claire frowned sadly. "Well, I suppose my first thought would be to name him a er his father," she whispered shamefully. "It was my only thought, and I haven't considered it since, of course. But that is the truth."

Jack did his best to control his expression for fear his facial muscles would contort into a sneer. The very idea of that innocent child being called Arthur made his skin crawl. It also made him uneasy to wonder if Claire still thought of that man as her child's father.

Unwillingly, his mind went back to the cold, cruel words Arthur Slickson had shouted upon their meeting in the woods. Arthur had taunted Jack, telling him that he would always know the child was not his. God, he prayed that would not be the case.

"We shall choose something we both like," Jack said conclusively.

Claire scrambled out from under the covers and crawled over to the breakfast tray, turning up the two teacups. "How do you take your tea?" she asked, changing the subject. "I suppose I ought to know."

Though he doubted Claire would ever have to steep a pot of tea again, it pleased him that she wanted to know. "Milk," he replied, "and one and one half of a sugar cube."

Claire looked back at him in confusion. "One and one half?"

"I make a mess every time, but I am very particular." Jack mused with a smirk, abandoning the bedclothes as well to show her. Claire poured the tea into both cups and Jack added his own milk.

"Do you take milk?" he wondered.

"Just a splash." She nodded.

Once the teas were both milky, Jack added one sugar cube to his cup, before crushing a second in his fingers and sprinkling in half, dusting the rest onto the tea plate.

"Do you know, if you had ever had to wash a dish, I'd wager you would have learned to enjoy two sugar cubes," mused Claire with a sly grin as she brought her cup to her lips.

Jack grinned back at her. She had teased him. It was familiar. And for a moment, it was easy. He knew the mood might change in mere minutes, but it could be familiar, and that gave him hope. Perhaps all was not lost a er all.

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**And they all lived happily ever --- ahahahahah lol**

**I hope you all had a magical Christmas however you were able to celebrate!! I had a really lovely time with my family and it was soooo nice to be with them a er this year. I was very spoilt, but I think my favourite gi was these three water colour paintings my aunty gave me. I collect water colours, and she found these adorable paintings and framed them for me. I LOVE when people know you and know exactly what to get you. That's why I love gi giving so much.**

**Same as I know your perfect gi would be a happily ever a er ... and I'll have to think about that as I plot my DRAMAAAAA.**

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