

"I don't want to be married just to be married. I can't think of anything lonelier than spending the rest of my life with someone I can't talk to, or worse, someone I can't be silent with." Mary Ann Sha er, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*

VIII.

Claire had a book open on her lap, but she was too nervous to read, it being her wedding day in a matter of hours. This time tomorrow night, she would be a wife. And she would not be Arthur's wife, as she had so long dreamed. She would be the wife of Jack Beresford, a man who was indeed still a great mystery to her.

Claire had kept her promise to Jack in the few days since their last meeting, though it was not hard to avoid Arthur Slickson when one kept to their bedroom. Mrs Denham, again, attributed it to nerves, and even Claire was surprised at how easy she was able to fool her mother. How good she had become at lying. It was not a talent that Claire had ever aspired to.

But late that Saturday night, Claire was disturbed by a knock on her door.

"Yes?" she called.

Mrs Denham quietly opened the door and hobbled inside, having abandoned her cane for the evening. She made quick work of shutting the door behind her and making her way to the edge of Claire's bed.

Claire abandoned her book, not that she had been reading it anyway.

"Are you alright, Mama?"

Mrs Denham smiled awkwardly. "Yes, Claire," she murmured.

She did appear to be struggling with something, which made Claire terribly nervous. Did her mother bear her bad tidings? For a dreaded second, Claire suddenly thought that perhaps Jack had changed his mind.

"Oh, one would think by the third daughter, this conversation would be a little easier," Mrs Denham said under her breath. "My dear, I have come to explain things to you, to help you know what to expect tomorrow night ... your wedding night."

Claire immediately paled. Oh, dear Lord, how Claire wished she could tell her mother such a conversation wasn't necessary, for she had learned the hard way already. But to say such a thing would be to break her mother's heart, among other ruinous things.

Claire then realised that not only was it her wedding day tomorrow, but it was also her wedding night. No matter their circumstances, Jack would expect ... Claire felt green.

"You needn't appear so frightened, dear," Mrs Denham assured her.

"It ... it is an act of love, a er all. One which creates life."

A rogue sob escaped Claire's chest as the realisation that her mother was entirely incorrect settled within her. Life was not only created through an act of love, but also an act of deception.

"Oh, dear, my darling," cooed Mrs Denham, shu ling closer to Claire on the bed, near enough to take her youngest daughter into her arms. Claire rested her head against her mother's chest and wept. Mrs Denham stroked Claire's back comfortingly, hushing her soothingly.

"Claire, I implore you to tell me why you are so upset," she begged.

"Surely this cannot be just nerves."

How Claire wanted to confide in her. But she would not let herself. "I am sad to leave you, Mama," whimpered Claire, without a word of a lie. Among every emotion that was flowing within her, Claire was truly upset at the fact that her silly actions had resulted in her need to leave her mother's house.

"Leave me?" Mrs Denham chuckled quietly. "My dear, I would never let you leave me." She li ed Claire's chin with her index finger. "Your getting married does nothing to sever my love for you, just as it did not for your sisters." Mrs Denham kissed Claire's cheek. "How I wish your father was alive to give you away tomorrow. You are going to be the most beautiful bride."

When Claire had calmed herself, Mrs Denham persisted with her original reason for visiting Claire's bedroom. She explained, in as delicate and ladylike detail as possible, exactly what Claire was to experience the following evening. And in that moment, Claire was far too embarrassed to be upset. When she had no questions, Mrs Denham had expressed her surprise, adding that Kate had prepared a whole list of them. That was knowledge that she could have quite happily gone on living without.

When it came time for Mrs Denham to leave, she asked, "Is this what you truly want, Claire?"

Claire was unprepared for the question, but her emotional state masked her apprehension. "Yes, Mama," she breathed. "I am sure." She was le alone to cry soundless tears into her pillow before sleep eventually overcame her.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

"First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

"Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gi of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

"Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined.

"Therefore, if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else herea er for ever hold his peace."

There was silence in the church, and Jack had half expected Arthur Slickson to come barging through the doors revealing everything, but he didn't, and Jack felt foolish to even think him capable of doing anything honourable.

Jack stole a glance down at Claire, whose blue eyes were solely fixed on the vicar, her lips pressed firmly together, as though the force between them would stop her whole body from trembling.

Beyond her expression, she was a vision. Her gown was a pale shade of rose pink, and Jack had recognised it instantly. It was the gown she had worn to the ball three years earlier, the one she had worn upon their first meeting. It still suited her remarkably. She wore a bonnet a ixed with flowers, and carried a bouquet emitting a pleasant perfume. She looked every bit the bride until one looked at her face.

The vicar continued to wa le, enjoying the sound of his own voice it seemed, before he suddenly surprised Jack by stating his full name.

"John Anthony Edward Beresford, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together a er God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Jack had attended one wedding in his lifetime, and it has been his brother's. The man who had been so dreadfully in love since his was barely out of the nursery had meant his vows whole-heartedly. Despite knowing it was the right thing to do, he felt a little uneasy in responding, "I will." Comfort her and keep her, yes. But love her? Would it be like that? Could it be like that? Would Claire ever allow that?

"Claire Frances Denham, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together a er God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Jack wondered if his very thoughts were running through Claire's mind. Or, was she wishing she were standing beside the vile man who had tricked her? Lord, the latter thought made him sick.

Jack did his best to mask his surprise when he heard Claire's so voice utter, "I will."

The vicar looked up to Peter, who was stood beside Claire. "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," replied Peter, as he placed Claire's hand in the vicar's.

The vicar then took Jack's right hand, before placing Claire's within it. It was then that Claire finally looked up at Jack. Her brows very furrowed slightly with anxiety, and he saw her lips wobble, but only for a moment. She was frightened, and Jack squeezed her hand, it being the only thing he could do in that moment.

Jack heard the vicar begin his vow, and he repeated, "I, John Anthony Edward Beresford, take thee, Claire Frances Denham, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight my troth."

As their hands dropped, Claire whispered, "I mixed up your names!" in a voice so so only he would hear.

Jack breathed a chuckle. "How many names does one need? I do not go by any of them anyway." To laugh, even quietly, and to see such a brief expression of amusement and relief on Claire's face filled him with pride.

As the vicar blessed the ring, Jack took Claire's le hand in his and let the ring linger at her knuckle. "With this ring, I thee wed, with my body, I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods, I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and other Holy Ghost. Amen."

Jack pushed the small ring onto Claire's finger properly.

Together, they then both knelt down before the vicar as the parish began to pray.

"Let us pray. O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life; send thy blessing upon these thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy Name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, whereof this ring given and received is a token and pledge, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

An amenechoed throughout the church.

The vicar joined their hands once more, and proclaimed, "Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. For as much as John Anthony Edward Beresford and Claire Frances Denham have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth, and have declared the same by giving and receiving a ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Man and wife. The words sent a shiver down Jack's spine as it became official. legal He had a wife. Together with the vicar and their witnessed, the register was signed, and it could not be undone. Jack and Claire were married.

ugh, it physically hurt me to write "obey" but it had to be accurate! But I hope you enjoyed it! They're married! Smooth sailing from here, right? Lol, you guys should know me better than that!!

School finished up for the year yesterday, which means I said goodbye to my kids for the final time. In Australia, a school year is the calendar year, January to December. As I am teaching at a di erent school next year, it's highly likely I might not see my kids ever again. I was literally SOBBING on my way home. When I dismissed them, I had to stay in my classroom and dry my eyes for a few minutes before I started crying to meet the parents. And they were all crying. So I went outside again. We've been through so much this year, and honestly, my kids have been the people I have spent the most time with out of anyone. I love them like they are my own and I don't have my arms around them anymore.

My kids have begged me all year to draw on my whiteboard and I always say no, but this week I gave in, expected them to do silly drawings. But no. They made a mural, with all of them writing how much they loved me, and how they would miss me. Every time I looked at that whiteboard, I cried.

I wished I could tell them what they meant to me when I had them in front of me for the final time, but I couldn't speak as I was crying. I always made a point to tell them that I loved them, because sometimes a child doesn't hear that from their family some days, and a child needs to hear everyday that they are loved.

But I hope they never forget me, as I will never forget them. We did remote learning together, and we did normal schooling together. We survived this year together, and some days, they were the reason I got out of bed in the morning. I would look forward to the minute they were allowed inside when I would hear my name being cheered as they were excited to see me.

God, I'm crying again. This is the BEST job in the world.

While I am so looking forward to meeting my new kiddos for next year, I am grieving the loss of these kids. I miss they each of their teachers for next year before I le , making sure they knew what special kids they have coming.

Xxxx