XXXIII

"No sooner met but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved; no sooner loved but they sighed; no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy; and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage..." William Shakespeare, As You Like It

XXXIII.	a
Claire lost all feeling in her legs as they buckled underneath her, her wrists catching her before she fell to the ground properly, saving her	

belly from any trauma. Her breaths were shallow and panicked and she felt as though she were going into shock.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Arthur walking away, leaving her on the ground, but Jack was quick to kneel before her, placing his hands under her arms to li her to her feet.

"Do you need a doctor?" Jack asked tersely, and Claire dared to look up at him.

"How could you do it?" Claire rasped tearfully. "How could you challenge him?"

She could see the mistrust as plain as day in Jack's hazel eyes. Were she not so frightened, so unnerved, she would have been furious.

a

"How could I not?" he countered angrily. "That man laughs at me!" he hissed. "And he has no respect for you."

"And so, you would kill him for it?" Claire exclaimed, almost shrilly. She wiped the tears from her eyes with her fingers. "Or you would die because of it?" Her voice broke at the very thought.

Jack's lips pressed firmly together. "Did you plan this?" he snapped. "Did you arrange to meet him? Did you mean to steal away to him? Tell me so at once."

Claire's hand whipped across Jack's cheek before she knew what she was doing, but she could not regret it. "No!" she cried emphatically. "No, I never planned anything! I never asked for anything! I was hot!" Claire insisted. "I told you so in the church. I needed some air and he was here without my knowledge. He accosted me and owing to the fi y-pound gourd I am carrying; I was not quick to get away! Though I tried to push him away from me. I did try."

Claire's hands fell to her sides as she looked up at Jack, truly unknowing what else she could do prove herself.

"You begged my forgiveness," she whispered. "You asked for my faith. You told me you trusted me."

Claire watched as Jack's face so ened, and his eyes filled with guilt and remorse. He nodded in concession, and said, "You're right. I did ask that of you. I do ... I do trust you, Claire. All I know is I rounded the corner and saw you ... with him. I wasn't paying much heed to what your hands were doing. I'm sorry. I made a snap judgement."

"I don't think you do," said Claire tearfully, as she shook her head. Claire felt a pain her chest, not unlike the pain she felt keenly the day that Arthur has spurned her in September. Only this pain made her previous su ering feel like a tickle. Claire's heart ached immeasurably at the realisation that perhaps Arthur, and the mistakes that she had made with him, would forever haunt her. He was stopping Jack from loving her, and in that moment, Claire realised that she wanted nothing more than for Jack to love her.

Properly love her. Passionately, mercilessly, foolishly and ardently love her. Claire wanted Jack to love her the way that she had fallen in love with him. Utterly, and without realising, Claire had become completely his. Claire's vision for her future had changed. She saw Jack. She saw them as terrific friends, the team they had been, and yet so stupidly in love with one another that they were the envy of all. She saw their children, the ones they would share together, and they would be raised in a loving home knowing nothing but care and compassion for their dreams. They would grow together, take care of one another, and be the other's champion. And yet there was an unyielding mountain in the way of Jack becoming Claire's.

Just as Arthur had taken everything from Claire once, she felt him

ripping this life away from her, too. Jack didn't trust her, and there was nothing she could do to change it.	
Claire was resigned, and yet her heart didn't waver. "I love you, Jack," she whispered. "I don't know if that means anything to you, but if it does, I ask, nay I beg you not to fight him tomorrow. Please. I can live with you not trusting me. It will kill me, but I can live with it. But I cannot live with the thought of you dying because of something so foolish as jealousy."	25 C
Jack's eyes widened and he stared down at Claire, seemingly searching her face for a sign of something. Claire looked up at him with furrowed brows, unable to discern what he wanted. But then, Jack brought his hands up to cup her face and a smile, a relieved smile spread across his face.	a
"You don't know if it means anything?" he asked in disbelief. "My God, Claire. It means everything. You mean everything to me. You are my life now. No one no one has said that to me before."	å
"Well, now they have," breathed Claire.	
Jack brushed away a lingering tear with his thumb. But then one of his hands dropped to her stomach. Just as he had done so many times before with their name game, Jack began to write. Only this time, he spoke aloud.	
"I," he began, tracing a straight line on her belly. "Love," he continued, and Claire's chest tightened. "You," he concluded, finishing with the letter "u", the letter that had her so convinced Jack was coming up with the most obscure name on earth.	a²
But had he been writing that declaration this whole time? Claire trembled as she tried not to stammer. "You love me?" she repeated.	đ
"I do," Jack confirmed.	
Despite having heard a declaration before, thisfelt like the first time someone had ever spoken those words to her. They loved each other. It had been declared, and before God. NearGod. They were adjacent to his house, a er all. Surely, surely this could only mean that they might move forward. Perhaps all hope was not lost as she had	
thought only moments ago. "You won't fight tomorrow?" Claire asked it as a question, but she	a
really meant it as an order. Jack shook his head. "No, I won't fight tomorrow," he complied. Jack leaned down but stopped himself just shy of Claire's lips. "I love you,"	
he whispered. "And I trust you."	aª
Claire's breath caught in her throat as he finally closed the distance.	ืส
Claire wasn't sure what had woken her up, but her eyes fluttered open sometime in the early morning. She reached out across the bed to feel for Jack, as perhaps he had woken her up, but Claire soon realised he was not there, and that his side of the bed felt quite cool.	a ³
It took a moment for Claire's sleep fatigued brain to realise what that meant, and she suddenly sat bolt upright in the bed. She anxiously searched their dark bedroom for any sign of Jack, but she didn't see him.	
"Dear God, no," she whispered as she threw back the bedclothes. Claire raced as quickly she could possibly carry herself into the dressing room, and found it empty, though she saw Jack's night shirt strewn over the back of a chair. He had already been in to dress. He was gone. "No!" Claire cried. She nearly broke the mantle clock as she read the time. It was just before six. When she threw open the drapes, she saw the morning fog and the lightening sky as the sun prepared to rise. "No!" Claire cried again, nearly screaming the word. Claire dropped the clock on the floor as she ran to the door. She forced herself to run, and she clutched at her belly as she moved as quickly as she could towards the family bedrooms.	
Her heart thundered and her tears blurred her vision. Claire panted	
and breathed erratically, but she found the will to push herself until she reached her destination. Claire opened Grace and Adam's door so forcefully that the door swung open completely and the handle smashed into the wall behind, making a cracking noise.	å
"Help me!"	a
Claire heard Grace gasp, and Adam automatically leapt out the bed in a defensive stance, positioning himself between Grace and the door, before he registered that it was Claire who had infiltrated their chamber. Adam immediately illuminated the lamp on their bedside	
table and the room began to glow.	ਕ

"Claire!" exclaimed Grace, who climbed out of bed quickly. "What has happened?" Grace reached Claire and pulled her into her arms.

But it wasn't Grace that Claire needed. It was Adam. Claire looked past her sister to her concerned husband. "Please," implored Claire. "You must go to Jack. He has challenged Arthur Slickson to a duel at dawn and he is gone. You must stop him."

"What is all the commotion in here? It sounded like a herd of horses was thundering down the halls," Cecily entered the bedroom wrapped in a silk robe, her hair out and combed. She frowned upon

wrapped in a silk robe, her hair out and combed. She frowned upon the scene before her in confusion.	
Adam disregarded his mother's question. "What do you mean Jack has challenged Arthur Slickson? Why would he do such a thing?"	a
Claire cried out in exasperation as she was certain her heart was going to burst. "GO!"Claire screamed. "Or I will get on a horse myself!" she threatened.	
Adam nodded, and immediately entered into his and Grace's dressing room to change. Claire impatiently wished he would go in his night shirt for all she cared.	å
She rested her forehead against Grace's shoulder as she tried to calm herself, but it wasn't working. She cried, out of fear, out of anger, and for a lack of knowing what else to do.	
"What would possess Jack to enter into a duel with this man?" Cecily demanded to know. "Do we know him? Who is he to Jack?"	
"Not to Jack," murmured Grace as she rubbed Claire's back. "Claire," she whispered. "Claire, tell me. Tell me what happened."	đ
Claire sobbed, and she couldn't speak for fear of hyperventilating. Grace quickly helped Claire to an armchair by the embers of the fireplace. "He told me he wouldn't fight!" Claire struggled to say in between sobs.	
"Adam will stop him. Don't fear," promised Grace.	
"But why is he fighting?" Cecily demanded to know, with a sound of fear in her voice that Claire had never heard before.	
"Because of me!" Claire exclaimed. Adam stormed out of the dressing room; an ensemble barely thrown	a
Adam stormed out of the dressing room; an ensemble barely thrown together."Adam, you bring him back." Cecily spoke almost viciously in her	
demand.	
Adam le the bedroom without saying a word. Despite knowing that help was now on the way, Claire cried harder. How she prayed Adam reached Jack in time.	a
"Claire, what happened with Arthur Slickson?" Grace asked, her voice tender, but wary. She knelt down on the floor before Claire and placed her hands on Claire's knees.	a
Claire couldn't speak, and all she could do was put her hands on her stomach.	G
She heard Grace inhale a gasp, as Grace uttered, "Oh, dear Claire. Please Lord, let me be wrong," Grace whispered, before she asked, "Claire, is Jack the father of your child?"	31
Yes. In every way that mattered. But in the way that Grace meant? Claire shook her head.	
"Oh, good God," Cecily all but hissed, and Claire felt her distain like a slap across the face. "How long a er you managed to trick my son into marrying you did you spurn him for another?"	
"Cecily!" snapped Grace.	a
"I never spurned him!" Claire exclaimed, finding her voice between sobs. "Please," she said, her eyes meeting her sister's. "Please understand. Arthur preyed upon me for years. I was led by him, tricked by him, and he made me believe that I had to perform certain acts in order to prove myself to him. I found out that I was going to have a child before Perrie's birthday party. When I told Arthur, he rejected me, and and that was the night that I met Jack for the second time. He happened upon me when I was in quite a state and I told him everything. He knew everything. And he o ered to marry me to save me from ruin."	
mouth. "I love Jack," Claire insisted vehemently, looking up at Cecily and	đ
flinching at the hard, disapproving expression on her face. "With every breath in my being, I love him. He is a good man, the best I know, and I don't know what I'll do if anything happens to him."	a
Her heart seized on the last word, but the pain began to suddenly radiate through her, centralising in lower abdomen as warm gush of liquid began to pour down her legs. Claire clutched her stomach as she cried out in pain.	a
Grace stood up abruptly as she realised what was happening. "Oh, Lord. We must send for the doctor!"	
"You must send her to her mother's house," countered Cecily. "Though I would not wish this shame on my friend."	
Claire felt that pain more keenly than she did the wave of agony that flowed through her body at that moment. She couldn't bear to see	
the look on her mother's face.	

Cecily stood over Claire, and she looked up at her mother-in-law fearfully. "Jack knew everything?'she said through gritted teeth. "He knew you were ruined? He knew were to have another man's child?

He still o ered to marry you?"	ď
"Yes," rasped Claire. "He said it was the right thing to do. He wanted to save me, and he promised that if we married, this child would be his. Ah!" Claire cried out as she closed her eyes tightly and endured her next pains. "He promised to look a er me, and I love him."	
"Foolish boy," hissed Cecily angrily. "If anythinghappens to my son " she began but couldn't finish her sentence.	ď
Yet Claire could imagine what she would say, and she did not blame Cecily in the slightest.	a
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I'm calling it. This author is some sick girl who enjoys the su ering of others. I remember reading one of her author's notes where she said she loved reading our chaotic comments as we struggled in anguish. I bet you she wakes up the morning a er posting and reads through the comments and laughs as we stress out. Total dick move!

Ah, but it makes an ending all the sweeter, doesn't it? Sorry for torturing you guys! You know I make you work for an ending ;)

Anyway, coming to you from Day 1 of our snap 5 day lockdown. I had the day from HELL yesterday.

So, long story short, the Australian Open went ahead. A er eradicating Covid, it went ahead, and so many international flights descended on us. I love the tennis. Don't get me wrong. But they brought the damn virus with them. And whatayya know, it got into the community. We now have a cluster of 13 cases so our state has gone into an emergency 5 day total lockdown to ensure it doesn't get out of hand and we can go back to normal. a

I'm not opposed to lockdown at all, a er all, we went through the toughest lockdown in the world last year and eradicated Covid. What I am opposed to is finding out at 2pm on a Friday that schools will be closed for three days and we have to provide remote learning for students. All the kids are eating lunch and all the teachers are in the hall together freaking out thinking we have no time. We chucked all the kids in one room and killed a few trees with the photocopier. Grabbed some big kids and got them stapling. Made three booklets per kid (over 250 booklets in total) for the three days, then had to explain to these kids a er they've only been in school for a week and a half that they weren't going to see me on Monday.

Before you know it, it's home time and I have parents asking me what's happening, and I'm freaking having an anxiety attack a er we were running around like headless chickens trying to magic up learning with no notice.

Schools are back open on Thursday (hopefully) provided everything goes well. We only had one new case today so I'm hoping it gets back to zero and we can go back to normal.

Seriously, teachers are superheroes. I know a lot of you are still remote learning, and believe me, I know the mental toll it takes. We're not paid enough, but if we could get paid in the smiles we bring out of our kids each day despite how we might be feeling, we'd be very rich indeed.

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