

LISTEN TO YOUR HEART

However awkward his response might prove, the question had to be asked.

—Don't you like me, Henry? said Elizabeth, standing over him.

—The truth is, he said, his hands on his knees, his eyes on the carpet, I don't trust my heart.

Confirmation, thought Elizabeth, of what she'd already guessed: Henry had once been deceived in love.

—But you must, Henry, she said. You should always trust your heart.

Henry was not like the other men Elizabeth had encountered through RHAPSODY ONLINE. At coffee-shops, cocktail-bars and pizza-parlours, she'd met the brash, boastful, openly lecherous and silently sinister. All so thoroughly unsatisfactory that she'd been close to abandoning her quest.

Then she met Henry.

Elizabeth knew at once that he was a gentleman: an old-fashioned label but one that suited him. Calm, courteous, well-groomed. Kind eyes, a pleasing smile, a tidy salt-and-pepper moustache. And, remarkably, Henry asked her questions. Still more remarkably, he listened to her answers.

Finding herself being listened to was, for Elizabeth, a novel experience. George had never listened. George talked. And talked and talked. It didn't bother her. Not after the first few years of marriage. In time, the verbal flow became a comfort. George's observations, opinions, puns and anecdotes washed over her: a background buzz, a burr, a steady hum. An affirmation that all was well. It was the silence from the sitting-room that alerted her that George was dead.

Her relationship with Henry took its steady course. Concerts and the theatre. (She didn't like either.) Walks in the countryside. (Cows frightened her.) But sacrifices must be made when, later in life, one tries to establish a new connection.

So far, so satisfactory.

Throughout, Henry remained a gentleman. Almost too much a gentleman. Which began to irritate her a little. Twice she invited him home for a nightcap but he politely declined. Then she insisted. But when he'd finished his whisky, he stood up to go.

It was time to be bold. Taking Henry by the hand, Elizabeth led him upstairs to the bedroom. As he sat on the edge of her double-bed, she said:

—Don't you like me, Henry?

Elizabeth woke in the night, as she often did, and reached out for George's hand. Then remembered it wasn't there.

Instead ...

Replaying what had followed her coaxing, Elizabeth smiled. Henry was certainly shy but he'd been a tender lover and, unlike George, who tossed and turned like an alligator trapped in a sack, a peaceful sleeper.

Next morning, re-entering the bedroom with a pot of tea, she tentatively touched the motionless shape in the bed.

The ambulance arrived immediately; a doctor shortly afterwards. It was demeaning to admit she knew so little about Henry and to be able to provide only the most meagre details.

Alone once more, she examined her feelings. Sadness. Regret. Remorse. Also, shameful to admit, vexation. Why hadn't Henry warned her?

—The truth is, Elizabeth, I don't trust my heart.

—Oh, but you must, Henry. You should always trust your heart.