

MADE FOR EACH OTHER

Ned & Grace. Grace & Ned.

We are made for each other, thought Ned. What's more, Father will approve. Or would. If approval were in his nature.

—Remember, Edwin, Father had told him. Most women are dangerously — yes — dangerously mad.

It was the only thing Father had told him about women — or about anything else really — which is why Ned remembered it. He might have asked Father if Mother, too, had been 'dangerously mad'. But Father didn't talk about Mother. Ever.

Ned was certain he was safe with Grace. Grace wasn't mad. No. Grace was plainly, palpably, incontestably sane.

They had met in the brown surroundings of a coffee shop. ('The Bottomless Pot.') More accurately, they had found themselves there alone, the last people left on a Saturday night. Whether Grace had joined Ned or he had joined her, Ned couldn't now remember. Indeed most of the last month's memories were a muddle until the moment when he had found himself down on one awkward knee.

—Well, Edwin, Grace had said, not unkindly, I shall have to see.

And she had taken from her handbag a list of questions — very sensible questions — about love and marriage and money and property — which Ned had answered as truthfully as he could — 'Yes' / 'No' / 'No' / 'Yes' — while Grace ticked little boxes.

After the last question, Grace returned the list to her handbag.

—I will let you know, Edwin.

Which she did. A day-and-a-half later.

—Yes, Edwin, she said. I will.

—There is one thing, Ned said. A single, timid misgiving. Do you think you could call me 'Ned'?

—I shall try, said Grace. Although 'Ned' is not how I see you.

'Ned' is how I see myself, thought Ned. Although he said nothing.

Lilith & Henry. Henry & Lilith.

—They are made for each other, said their friends.

Everyone who met them said the same and had done since the university dramatic society's autumn term audition. Arriving early, Lilith and Henry had seated themselves on two vacant thrones on a dais. (The summer term production had been *The Taming of the Shrew*.) This was the scene that revealed itself to the director when he scuttled in with his script and clipboard. Lilith and Henry. Elegant and languid. Effortless perfection. They were cast at once. Thenceforward, they were always cast. In every production. Neither of them, it must be admitted, was a prodigious talent but this wasn't the point. Lilith and Henry needed to be seen. More accurately, their friends needed to see them. Such a wonderful couple. She so golden, he so bronze, shimmering in a silver mist.

Later, when Lilith came to think about it, she couldn't remember when — or whether — she and Henry had taken the decision to be together. It was as if it had been taken for them. As if not to be together would have been to let everyone down. Lilith sometimes wondered if Henry felt the same.

For three enchanting years, social circles revolved around them. Hopes soared and tumbled. Loyalties were tested. Passions became enflamed. Love blazed and faded and blazed again. And at the still centre of everything were Lilith and Henry. Cool, calm, consummate. Surrounded by those who adored them. A consequence was that Lilith and Henry spent very little time together entirely alone — although those hours that they did spend in each other's company were perfectly pleasant.

Finals were finished. The wheel had started to slow. Soon the curtain would come down and the players would go their separate ways. An end was needed. A resolution was required. Or, if not 'required', wished for. Fervently. So fervently that disappointment would have been hard to bear.

—Will you, Lily? Henry had said.

—Please, Henry. Never, never call me 'Lily'!

The wedding — a cornucopia of lemon and cream — was staged in a Saxon parish church. Lilith's parents showed themselves as exquisite as their daughter, while Henry — unexpectedly — was found to be an orphan with a wealthy guardian who dispensed largesse from a rocky island he inhabited in the Highlands. It was, all their friends agreed, a charming way to end a most magical interlude.

Ned and Grace spent their honeymoon in Westward Ho! Whenever the rain stopped, they walked beside the sea and watched the grey Atlantic waves. Ned liked the sea but he had hoped for more. His dream had been to go to Venice. St Mark's Square, the Doge's Palace, the *Teatro La Fenice*. To lie with his love in a gondola under the Bridge of Sighs. But Grace had little time for dreams and the money they saved went towards the deposit on their flat in Muswell Hill.

Lilith and Henry spent their honeymoon in Verona. (Her mother's suggestion.) The hotel proposed the *Menu Romeo & Giulietta*. Henry chose *Tris di Carpacci — Salmone, Tonno e Spada con citronette*. Lilith chose *Prosciutto crudo rustico con mozzarella di bufala*. Lilith's was the wiser choice. Henry was ill all night. He was no better the next day. Nor the day after. When — three days later — he showed signs of recovery, Lilith left his bedside to explore the city alone. It was lovely, of course. But they were both happy to be home in the Parsons Green apartment that Henry's guardian had so thoughtfully provided for them.

Ned had warned Grace that Father might not attend their wedding so that, when he didn't, it was no surprise. But it was a shock to learn that — while they'd been in Westward Ho! — Father had remarried. And another shock when — a year later — his widow told them Father had died. Ned had always believed Father to be wealthy. He had the air of a wealthy man. But air, it seemed, was all he had. When the solicitor read out his will, it was plain that Father was penniless.

—No joy there then, said Grace.

—No, said Ned. None.

Shortly after their return from Verona, Lilith and Henry learned that Henry's guardian had died. Lilith was on hand to offer comfort but Henry was stoical. Finding himself unexpectedly rich, Henry's plans to seek glittering employment seemed suddenly redundant. No matter. He adapted to leisure readily and devoted his time to jazz. Lilith didn't like jazz. She detested its rasp and rattle. But couples can't share everything, she reasoned, and she had her little job in the art gallery to occupy her.

An aside. (There will be others.) Marriage is a tricky business. Or can be, for a year or two, while you find out who it is you've married. Sex may sometimes smooth the path. Although sex can be tricky, too.

Grace knew about sex and marriage. She had read up on the subject and highlighted and underlined several passages. Her regime was regular. On Thursday nights and — for variety — on Sunday mornings. There were seldom any hiccups. It was, Grace thought, satisfactory and quite sufficient. Tender gestures at other times led Ned nowhere. With brisk efficiency Grace removed his hand from below her breast; soft music would be turned off sharply; red roses were taken straight to the sink where their tender stalks were trimmed with sharp kitchen scissors. Was it ungrateful to want more? Ned wondered. But more, he couldn't deny, was what he wanted. Although more of what he wasn't sure.

Before Henry, sex for Lilith had been something of a trial. She had nothing against it. Not a thing. But so much of her early youth had been spent defending herself against encroaching hands, busy tongues and pressing flesh that it had quite exhausted her. Henry was therefore a relief. He was tender, delicate, considerate. Almost too considerate. Lilith had imagined — she didn't know why — that marriage would change things. It didn't. Theirs wasn't exactly a sexual desert but the image of a neglected

allotment often sprang to mind. Once, when, delicately, she had raised the topic — as one would with a stranger — Henry replied, 'I'm afraid sex doesn't do much for me.' And added, 'I hope that's all right?' Lilith nodded — as one does with strangers — but she was almost certain that it wasn't.

Marco & Flo.

No, no, no. It won't work. No. So it was said — in English and Italian — by their friends and relations. (In Italian to their faces; in English behind their backs.) Were they right?

There isn't time to tell you how Marco and Flo met at Victoria Station. (He was an hour-and-a-quarter early for a train to Hastings while she should have been at Charing Cross.) Nor how Marco — tall and correct — harboured a desire to be English, while Flo — plump and chaotic — yearned to be extravagantly Italian. Absurd, of course. As absurd as falling in love. Particularly as Marco's English was limited and Flo's Italian was flawed. (Although, it may be remarked, Marco and Flo were fluent in that language where sounds are more eloquent than words.) Nor is there time to tell you about their wedding at the Euston Road Registry Office, attended only by Uncle Hugo who, as a young man, had fallen in love with an Italian beauty in Rimini, been warned by his family that — should he marry her — he could expect to inherit nothing, and had, with a breaking heart, taken a train back to England and lived thereafter a bone-dry bachelor's life in Georgian Bath. Uncle Hugo had always been fond of Flo, took a liking to Marco and happily provided the money they required to open the *Ponte Vecchio*, a modest eatery in Camden's Little Italy. No, there's no time to tell you this. Besides Flo and Marco and Uncle Hugo are secondary characters and we must return to our principals.

Time passed.

Life is passing, thought Ned in Muswell Hill, in the dark days of early February.

Like muddy bubbles in a sluggish stream, thought Lilith in Parsons Green.

I must do something, Ned told himself, sternly.

But what? Lilith asked herself, mournfully.

—I have booked a table for Valentine's Night, Ned told Grace.

—I have booked a table for Valentine's Night, Lilith told Henry.

—Nowhere expensive, I hope, said Grace.

—Oh, said Henry.

It is no coincidence that both Ned and Lilith booked tables at the *Ponte Vecchio*; it is only because they did that they appear in this story at all. Nor is it a coincidence that their tables were next to each other; they were the only tables available. The year before two other couples had booked the same tables at the back of the restaurant under the antique wine rack. During the course of the evening they had struck up a conversation and pushed their two tables together. The friendship that started that night blossomed through the year. In January they booked the same tables although, as it happened, now they were two different couples. Later, they'd had second thoughts. It might, they felt, be awkward. And they cancelled their bookings. Which is why both tables were available when — within minutes of each other — first Ned and then Lilith telephoned the *Ponte Vecchio*. It is, however, a coincidence that on the thirteenth of February two couples — one in Muswell Hill, the other in Parsons Green — were listening to *Tosca*. (Although they were listening to different recordings.) It is the kind of coincidence that is frowned upon in fiction but allowable in fact. You are therefore free to frown but this is what happened.

Grace didn't dislike opera especially. It was music she didn't care for. Why then was she sitting there with Ned? She really couldn't say.

Henry hoped Lilith would leave the room. Or fall asleep. Or something. It was frustrating when she didn't. He was aching to play Thelonius Monk.

At last it is over.

Tosca has jumped from the ramparts and fallen to her death.

Grace looked up from her crossword.

Henry fidgeted on the sofa.

Ned and Lilith sat in their silences, trying to decipher what they were feeling.

Entrava ella fragrante,

mi cadea fra la braccia.

She entered, fragrant,

And fell into my arms.

... Ned read in the notes.

L'ora è fuggita, e muoio disperato!

E non ho amato mai tanto la vita!

The moment has flown and I die in despair!

Never have I loved life so much.

... Lilith translated. (She had studied Italian in Perugia.)

Yearning is so difficult to describe. A humming. A thrubbing. A sharp emptiness. A dull agony. The tick-tick-tick of a wall-clock. The sigh of a slowly spinning globe.

—I hold the key to something, thought Ned. Something special, something mystical, something magical. But what will it open?

—I am trapped, ensnared, enchained, thought Lilith. I must find my release. But who will release me?

Grace broke the silence.

—What I can never understand in opera, Edwin, is why, when characters have something to say, they feel the need to *sing* it?

Henry couldn't bear it any longer.

—My problem with opera, Lily, he said, is that it is so *emotional*.

Ned made his decision that night.

And Lilith made hers.

The next morning they both caught trains. Ned travelled from St Pancras and Lilith from Waterloo. I can't tell you where they went because they have left the story. But neither of them remembered to cancel their bookings at the *Ponte Vecchio*.

The *Ponte Vecchio* is always fully-booked on Valentine's Night and Marco is mildly irritated to find that the two tables under the antique wine rack have remained unoccupied. But, he decides, he won't think about this until the morning.

The last diners have left and Flo is locking the door. Marco takes down the bottle of *Barolo* that he has set aside. Together they go into the kitchen. Flo lights a candle and Marco pours the wine. They hold up their glasses and look into each other's eyes. They smile. There is no hurry. And no need to speak. When the bottle is empty, Marco will blow out the candle and take Flo's hand. It would be indelicate to follow them up the stairs. Or to say any more.