

The Phone call

Thursday November 8th

"Hello. Branchester 23654."

"Mummy. I t's me. I need to talk to you."

"Of course darling. You're coming over tomorrow so we'll be able to have a good chin-wag then."

"No. I need to talk to you now. I t's really important."

Changing the receiver to my right ear I sit down ready for this essential conversation.

"OK, so what's the problem?"

"How do you know whether you should marry someone or not? I mean, John and I feel like brother and sister."

"But the sex is good too isn't it?"

"Well yes, but ..."

"What are you looking for? The Grand Passion, the fairy tale, in-love-with-love that the films show and that we read about in stories? Think about it. We've both had that impulsive head-over-heels feeling and where are those guys now?"

"OK, point taken. But John is thinking about going back home to New Zealand."

"Why?"

"We were talking about how we're more like best friends than lovers. Don't you have to feel different to be husband and wife?"

"What could be better than good sex with your best friend? Friendship is the most important part of a marriage. Grand Passion can't last forever. I t's too intense. I t has to subdue. When it does, what do you have left unless you have friendship?"

"I'm worried about feeling trapped."

"Why? John doesn't mind if you want to come and see me or go out with your friends without him. It's a two way thing. He doesn't want you with him every single time he goes out with his mates does he?"

"No, but is it natural to want to spend time apart?"

"I can only talk from my own experience; compare the way I used to be with your dad and how I am now with Neil. Your father and I have always been friends too, that's why we stayed together as long as we did. But he couldn't bear to let me out of his sight, so I did feel trapped. It was his jealousy that eventually made us split up. As you know, now I think of him as my big brother. But Neil's not possessive at all so there's no problem."

As I speak I feel my eyes widening. I'm shrugging my shoulders, turning my free hand palm upwards. I smile inwardly at my unconscious body language as I continue.

"He doesn't mind if I go and do my own thing. The thought of a meditation session horrifies him, so I go on my own. He prefers to play on his computer or meet the other old farts at the pub."

"So if it's OK not to want to do everything together, how should you feel about each other when you're apart?"

"We both love and trust each other. Without each other we are incomplete. We describe ourselves as two halves of the same person, so in loving each other we love ourselves too. We wouldn't want to hurt ourselves so we wouldn't think of doing anything to hurt our other half. But first and foremost we're friends. We always hold hands when we're out walking. If we were four years old we'd be skipping together."

"But what about the things that annoy you? What about his drinking?"

"It did upset me a lot but because we both want our relationship to work, we're prepared to do something about it. I try to understand how he needs alcohol - it's part of his life. Now he buys lower alcohol beers. At parties he's learned that when I say I can see early warnings of his going OTT, I'm not his mother accusing him of being drunk. I'm his wife, worried about losing the ability to communicate with him. Now he listens."

"Is that enough?"

"You have to look honestly at your intended life partner. You must be realistic and see their faults too. Admittedly it's a huge bonus if they see them and try to do something about them. Even then you must be aware that with the best will in the world, they might never completely get them under control. So you must decide whether you can live with John's failings. If you can't, be honest, face up to that and just stay friends."

"But how d'you know if it IS real love?"

"I believe there's a difference between being 'in love' and loving. Both are as real as each other although being 'in love' usually includes being 'in lust'. That's the head-over-heels stuff I was talking about before which often gets mistaken for loving. But you don't have to be 'in love' with someone to truly love them.

"Real love grows. It gets stronger and stronger as time passes. It's not only built on friendship; it's built on trust, understanding, sharing, caring and possibly sex if it's that type of relationship.

"The more you love someone, the more you want to make things and life pleasurable for them. So you are both happy to do things for each other, whether they be emotional and supportive or sexual and physical. The more familiar you become with each other's likes and dislikes, it all gets easier and easier and better and better."

"Thanks mum."

There's a slight pause, then she continues.

"Would it be OK then if we get married two weeks on Saturday?"

A smile lights up my face as I pull a tissue out of the box beside me and catch the tear before it drips off my chin.

The Preparations

Friday November 9th

Cambridge

That conversation with mum was the final decider. We'd found out about the cancellation before we called her and had booked it provisionally. Now we've just got back from the Registry Office after posting our banns. The Registrar was really kind to hold the date as it's the first Saturday that we can legally get married!

Not only that but the 24th coincides with Della's visit from Scotland. She's arriving the day before and has offered to do my hair. It's brilliant that she'll be able to be with us. We were all so close at Uni., both during tutorials and socialising with the gang when we weren't studying.

Monday November 12th

Branchester - The Outfit

Mary goes into my bedroom to try on the wedding dress I wore when I married her father. As expected it's too big for her. She doesn't particularly like the Guipure lace sleeves and bodice covering which I'd adored all those years ago. My friend Linda has offered to alter the dress to fit, so I'm sure she won't mind removing the lace too. Excitedly we pack the dress back into the box and make our way to Linda's. Mary doesn't like the shoes, far too old fashioned. She's not sure about the veil and tiara headdress either and wants to reserve judgement until she's looked round the shops.

Armed with a mouthful of pins, Linda forms neat folds down Mary's slender figure. Then she carefully pulls down the long zip at the back of the dress so that my darling daughter can step carefully out. We go back to my home leaving the snowy white garment in Linda's tender care.

Wednesday November 14th

Cambridge - The Reception

"Oh wow! Really? You mean it? £500? That's a lot of money!!! Thanks Dad. I hope you don't mind if we use it to pay for the reception."

"It's yours to do with as you wish. Besides, I prefer that to having to worrying what to bring as our contribution to your communal feast idea. I remember you telling me when you were little that your mum used to take you on picnics where everyone took a donation of food or drink, but that was when I wasn't around."

"I'll find out if the community centre would still be the best place or if we can find somewhere better."

"Why don't you see if there's a local pub that can lay on food for you. That way you won't have to worry about drinks or a separate place to hold the reception."

"Brilliant idea Dad. Thanks again. Bye for now."

"Bye darling."

Thursday November 15th

Cambridge - Transport

"Bill! Loraine! I'm speechless! What a wonderful offer! I know the lemon Chevy is your pride and joy. John and I will feel like royalty riding in it. Perhaps we should get some white gloves and practice waving out of the window of our little old £50 Fiesta."

Friday November 16th

Cambridge - John's Outfit

"Oh Mum. Guess what? We managed to find a Scottish dress hire shop in Cambridge. They don't have the exact tartan of John's ancestors' clan but said that they have a Black Watch tartan, which they reckon is the closest match. He tried it on and looks very handsome even in a skirt!"
I'll be ready for him to pick up the day before.

Branchester - Flowers

I must be a glutton for punishment. Working in a florist when I was 15 and making buttonholes and corsages, is a long way from constructing a wedding bouquet. Still, I can but try.

I've picked some beautiful trailing green leaves and some aromatic purple Lavender out of our garden and the flower stall in the High Street had a lovely selection of flowers. I may be hopeless with the names of most of the blooms, (I do know I've got pink pinks, white carnations and lilac freesias) but I pride myself on having a good eye for shape and colour and know what I've bought will look beautiful with the pure white of the dress and the purple of the stole.

On my way home from work yesterday I saw, on a stall in Euston station, some bright blue flowers, the sort that I've seen in dried arrangements,. They also had the white fluffy stuff, which I think is called Gypsophila or something like that anyway.

Logic has told me not to get the arrangements prepared too early, so I'm not going to start getting them together till the morning of the day before the wedding. Linda's never done anything like this before but she's offered to try to help me.

Cambridge - Contact from New Zealand

"Hello John. We've managed to arrange for someone to take care of the farm so Dad and I will be able to get over to be with you on your big day. We'll be arriving next Wednesday."

Those words made my future husband one of the happiest men alive.

Monday November 19th

Branchester - The Outfit

The dress fits like a glove. Where the lace has been removed, Linda has machined round the neck and armholes to neaten them off. They look naked and I can see the disappointment in Mary's face. When we get back home Mary bursts into tears.

"I don't like it Mummy."

"Don't worry darling. I know what's wrong. I'll get something to put round the neck and armholes and it'll be fine."

I remember seeing strings of pear shaped pearl beads and have visions of them lying over the offending stitching, completely hiding it. I can also visualise individual beads stitched randomly over the bodice, gradually petering out as they work their way down. I'll make it look beautiful for her.

Tuesday November 20th

Branchester - The Outfit

Knit Knacks in town has beads but they're the wrong size and shape. I'm on my own in the car on my way to Needlecraft, when inspiration strikes. I suddenly get a clear picture in my mind of that beautiful thick silk dress trimmed with snow-white ostrich feathers. Fortunately I'm in slow moving traffic as I let go of the steering wheel to punch the air as I shout out loud "That's it!" Embarrassed, I look round to see if anyone's seen me.

Needlecraft has the right trimming but in the wrong colour. Cream fur would look mucky against the pure white of the dress. Mary's working in London, so I 'phone her, tell her my idea and ask if she can get to John Lewis to buy some.

London - The Outfit

I love Mum's idea for the dress. Now to the fabric section in John Lewis. Would you believe it, they haven't got any ostrich feather trimmings at all. Mind you I love that purple shot silk. I t'd make the most beautiful stole. It is November after all, so it might be a bit chilly. I'm not sure how much I'll need so I'll call mum. Thank heavens for mobiles.

Mum thinks there's a trimmings shop near here so I'll pay for my beautiful fabric and go exploring.

"I've found the shop Mum and they've got exactly what I want but there's only about a couple of metres on the card."

"Get what they've got and I'll do the best I can."

Wednesday November 21st

Branchester - The Outfit

I want Mary to look her best, but the dress and veil look a bit tired. The new stitching's a bit bumpy too, so I take them both to the cleaners.

We obviously didn't explain to Linda exactly what we wanted for the stole so she folded the fabric in half before she stitched it. Now it's not nearly long enough to wear the way Mary intended. She's made a lovely job of it though, so Mary's going to keep that as an extra wrap. But she still wants a long stole for her big day so Neil took a snippet of the fabric with him to work yesterday and managed to get to John Lewis in his lunch break to buy some more. I asked Linda if she'd just run a hem all around the new piece. The stole is complete.

Cambridge - The Reception

John and I have been to more different pubs in the past week to find out if they do catering than all those I've been to in the 10 years I've lived in Cambridge. We didn't bother to ask in the grotty ones and the decent ones either don't do food or are too expensive. To keep within our budget all they can offer is chicken drumsticks and cheese sandwiches with not much else beside and that's not really my idea of a wedding feast.

In the hope that someone, somewhere can give us inspiration, we've been mentioning our predicament to nearly everyone we meet, even perfect strangers. Today though, we discovered the Red Bull in Newham. Not only have they promised to home-cook a true banquet in our honour, they've offered to make some special items for us. I'm not sure why they asked what colours I'll be wearing, but I've been told to be patient and all will be revealed in due course.

Cambridge - The Cake

John's mum has made a beautiful fruit cake, but we've got to leave it to stand a while before we can start decorating it so that it can recover from its journey from New Zealand. There are packs of ready-made icing and various other decorations in a plastic carrier bag under the kitchen table. John's Great Aunt Ina has even sent over some delicate flowers for the top that she hand-made with icing. I can't believe that something that delicate made it thousands of miles to get here unscathed! As soon as one of us gets a few minutes, we're going to try to get the cake decorated. Unfortunately there's not much time left before Saturday.

Friday November 22nd

Cambridge - John's Outfit

"Mum. John was over the moon when his dad offered to go with him to pick up his outfit.

Friday November 23rd

Branchester - The Dress

The cleaners have made a brilliant job of the dress. Even the stitching round the neck and armholes doesn't look so bad now. The dress and veil were in a proper cover when I picked them up yesterday and are now hanging in my front hall. Mary doesn't think she'll want to use the veil or the headdress, but I'll keep them together just in case. I wish I could get on with sewing the fur in place, but that's in Cambridge with Mary.

The box the dress was in is the perfect size to hold the flowers, so I've lined it with tissue paper. We'll be able to leave as soon as all the flower arrangements are made up. The bouquet is done and the ribbons are in place, now how many corsages do I need? Grandmother, two mothers, one stepmother and one sister - right that makes five. I can't remember how many buttonholes we need. Fennel leaves make a brilliant substitute for fern and we've plenty more in the garden, so I'll make buttonholes from all the pinks and carnations I've got left.

Oh my god! Look at the time. We should have left ages ago. Poor Neil's still got to drive to Cambridge, then I've still got to get that fur sewn round the dress.

Let's get everything into the car and we can be off.

Cambridge - The Evening and The Wee Small Hours of the Morning Before the Wedding

Mary's mobile home

"Hello, is that Cambridge radio? Can you help us please? This is John Holmes here. We were just recording Truly, Madly, Deeply by Savage Garden to play as we sign the register after our wedding tomorrow and the tape's broken."

Mum's just arrived. The flowers look super. We've made a space for the bouquet in our fridge and the other flowers are in a cool part of Angie's mobile home next door. Mum's in there now sewing the fur round the dress. She hasn't had a drink yet since she arrived, so Angie's going to take a glass of bubbly into her.

Angie's mobile home

"Thanks Angie. I've just finished sewing the fur round the neck but it's quite fiddly and I really can do with a drink. Neil and I even ate our supper in the car on the way here."

"Would you like me to take over doing some of the sewing for you too? You haven't yet had a chance to socialise with anyone yet. They're all next door with more of the bubbly if you finish that glass."

"Oh would you? I'd really appreciate it. I'll come back again in a few minutes and take another turn."

"Don't worry. Take as long as you like."

I was really grateful to Angie for that break. She's done one armhole so I've only got to finish the other one. Wow! Someone up there is certainly looking after us. Anyone would think we'd carefully measured round the neck and armholes to make sure we had enough trimming. The remnant of fur that Mary bought was an exact fit.

Mary's mobile home

Truly amazing. Our plea on Cambridge radio only went out a few minutes ago and someone's already 'phoned to say they have a CD waiting for us to pick it up. John and his friend Mick have gone to get it.

The Wedding

Saturday November 24th

Cambridge - The Morning of the Big Day

My daughter looks so beautiful I feel tears prickling my eyes. Della's made a wonderful job of Mary's hair, twirling her natural dark curls around twisted ribbons and sparkly clips. The sun's shining and is reflecting on the clips making them twinkle.

Although it's November it's so warm that none of us need cardigans or coats. Only the bride wears a wrap, her purple silk stole floating behind her as she walks to the long, yellow car.

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I feel like someone else, perhaps a queen. It doesn't seem real as I step into the Chevy.

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Cambridge - At the Reception

It's amazing to think that everything's gone so well. There were no nasty surprises at the ceremony as the bride and groom made their vows to each other. Both looked equally impressive, him in his kilt and her in the dress which looks so different from when I wore it as I married her father.

We followed the happy couple as they got out of the chevy outside the Red Bull, then into the pub where a veritable feast had been laid out. They'd even made pasta and cake dishes and matched balloons and table decorations in the same colours as Mary's white dress and purple stole.

John's mum is great at baking. Don't know who decorated the wedding cake but it looked absolutely fabulous and tasted as good as it looked.

Then came the speeches. Never one to keep quiet, I read out what I'd written for the occasion:

Mary

From the first moment you were laid in my arms I have loved you. I was besotted with you. My life revolved around you. For the first 3 months of your life I had only the pleasurable jobs to attend to. My mum took over washing your dirty nappies and my clothes, leaving me the wondrous tasks of bathing you, examining your tiny fingers and toes, feeding you, cuddling and holding you; loving you.

Throughout your life we have had a very special link. I describe it as an invisible silver thread which links us. In my mind's eye it fastens at our middles, almost like an umbilical chord. When you were as far away as Australia, we still sensed each other's feelings and emotions - phoning each other on occasion to find out what was wrong or to share our happiness.

And today. Today we are at a crossroad in our relationship. We will never stop loving each other, but now that you have a husband, our relationship must change. It's a bit of a cliché to talk about gaining a son rather than fearing the loss of a daughter, but it's true.

John has made his presence felt in our lives by making you happy. You asked me the qualities needed for a lasting love relationship. All I could do was quote from my own experience.

I have had the mad, passionate love, but where are those men now? They're certainly not part of my life because that sort of frantic feeling burns itself out. Then you are left with nothing - unless you have friendship.

It's friendship upon which I believe true love is based. Friends who can laugh at the same things, or who can simply enjoy being quiet together. Friends care if their partner is upset and try to do something to alleviate that distress. As young children can hold hands and skip along together, true friends don't judge each other.

Friends in a marriage get the best of both worlds. They have the friendship, but lust has a place too. When two people care enough about each other, they want to give their partner pleasure in every way they can. And with practice and honesty, their pleasure, as their love, gets deeper and deeper, stronger and stronger.

John

Welcome to our family, son.
