

Frog Kissing for Beginners

by

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Chapter 1

(Reading Sample)

Klara

For what felt like the 375th time, I was sitting in a church that was dressed up for the occasion, just like me and the strangers around me were, and I smiled. Smiled. Smiled.

‘Konrad Paul Dobberin, do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, to live together according to God’s ordinance in the Holy Estate of Matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honour and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep you only unto her as long as you both shall live?’

Konrad turned around. His eyes wandered from face to face, looking for the one face his heart was yearning for: Mine. His look dived into my eyes and delved into my heart. The united beat of our churning hearts took our breath away. He wrested his hand from hers, left his previous life behind, flying on the wings of his suddenly burning love, straight to his destiny. He came rushing towards me, fell on his knees. ‘Johanna, when I just saw you, I knew: You are the woman I have always been searching for. The woman with whom I want to share my life and my dreams and never grow old. The woman of my dreams and of my life. Johanna, will you marry me?’

My eyes filled with tears. This was somewhat unexpected. I did not really know him. And he was just about to marry my best friend. Really, I could not... On the other hand...

‘I do.’

Konrad’s response hit me right in the face and beat the silly daydream out of my head. He was still standing in front of the altar to marry Klara, he was still holding her hand, he was still smiling at her. Of course he was.

And I realized that I had just watched too many romantic comedies.

‘Klara Miller, do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, to live together according to God’s ordinance in the Holy Estate of Matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honour and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep you only unto him as long as you both shall live?’

‘I do.’

Klara’s smile was beaming at her Konrad, her family, her friends, the day – her

life. She was a beautiful bride: tall, slim, in a classic dress – white, of course – that underlined her impeccable figure, with pink flowers in her blonde hair, matching her bouquet, to which she had been clinging as if her life had depended on it and which she, now that the question of questions had been answered in the positive, held in an almost relaxed manner. Had it not been Klara, I would have fallen easy prey to jealousy.

The late summer sun sent its light through the stained glass windows and bathed the faces of the happy couple in a soft, warm glow.

Klara had planned all the details of this day, ever since our schooldays, so that it felt like I had known the bridegroom for ages, even though Klara had only introduced us earlier in the day. Well, in a way, he was an old acquaintance, after all: Klara and I had spent hours on the phone, discussing this charming, friendly, humorous, educated and, on top of it all, attractive, in summary perfect doctor.

Him, who had been living next door to Klara briefly before moving to the other end of Berlin. ‘But not because of a woman or anything like that. Not that this would be any of my business, of course. Or matter to me. But, anyway, well, at the moment, he is single.’ – ‘Yes, of course, Klara, whatever you say.’

Him, whose departure naturally was completely unrelated to the fact that Klara had also moved close to him, shortly thereafter.

Him, who – Coincidence, thou moody master of fate! – by mere chance had crossed Klara’s path at the local riding club. ‘What? You did not know that I have started to take riding lessons? Jo, I always wanted to do that. Didn’t I tell you?’ – Yeah, right.

Him, whom she had invited to the opera when a friend had unfortunately and unexpectedly become ill and could not join her. – Had she ever told me that friend’s name, by the way?

Him, with whom it had clicked ‘so unexpectedly – for both of us’. – As previously indicated: Yeah, right.

Him – the man she was just marrying.

The Konrad whom she loved so much that she was now overcoming one of her greatest fears. Even during music class in school, Klara had been confined to the triangle while the others were singing, due to her stage-fright-induced lack of talent. But now she turned around to the congregation: ‘Dear friends, dear family. You know how much I dislike singing. In particular in public. But now, I have found the person with whom I am not afraid of anything or anyone any more. And this is why I now want to

sing our song for him. Konrad, do you recall? It was playing when you brought me home after the opera, after our first, kind-of-date. And it expresses exactly what I feel with you. What I feel for you. This will not be an artistic highlight, but, Konrad, with you, I am more than I can be. With you, I am strong – and I can even sing.’

So, Klara sang ‘You Raise Me Up’ in front of her family, in front of her friends, but mostly for her Konrad.

With every wrong note and every Kleenex that made its way out of a handbag or pocket, my heart felt happier. And with every word, it felt sadder. I was happy for Klara. Of course, I was happy for Klara. And for Konrad. For both. Sincerely. From the bottom of my heart. But while I enjoyed being happy with and for those dear to me, I would equally have enjoyed being happy for myself, for a change. Egoistic? Of course. But it became harder and harder to suppress this feeling of ‘What about me?’, here and now. Weddings are always a milestone. Naturally for the newlyweds. But the solemnly-happy ‘I do’ of the protagonists also calls us onlookers to take stock of our own state of mind and state of heart. To ask ourselves where we stand in life and in love, why things are the way they are and what we really want.

I was 39. And had never really been in love. When I was attracted to a man, he inevitably mentioned his girlfriend / fiancée / wife or, if not that, his boyfriend / fiancé / husband. Or he was about to emigrate abroad or to a monastery or – no, not even I had met an astronaut about to leave on a mission to Mars. Yet.

Years ago, life had seemed clear: high school, college, university, PhD, job. And somewhere along the way, fate would automatically guide me to the one it had chosen for me. We would get married, or not, have children, or not, have a house, or not. In any event, we would enjoy life, solve all the problems of mankind in long and deep discussions or just fool around. We would go to the theatre, the movies, museums or dancing, hang out on the sofa, have friends over for dinner, laugh, hike, bike, travel, cook, sing – we would just do everything that is more fun when doing it with the right someone rather than by yourself. But then, without me noticing, one year after another had come and gone, and I had stayed alone. Around me, everyone was getting married and having children, but I stayed alone. When the I-love-you virus had hit the office, some years ago, I had been the only one who had not opened the infected email. Someone loving me? That seemed fishy. Well, coming from my boss (who had obviously not seen anything fishy in the world’s loving him), such a confession would have shocked rather than tickled me, admittedly.

My friends tried to reassure me by telling me about couples that had met at a – yes, at this point in time, it was undeniably an ‘advanced’ age. However, the coincidences became more and more coincidental (‘You! Won’t! Believe! This! So, she arrives at the top of the mountain, and there is no one around, apart from this one guy sitting there, leaning against the summit cross. They look at each other, and – boom!’). At some point, I would really no longer believe it. And I would still be alone. Soon, it would no longer be my friends but their children inviting me to their weddings. ‘Oh, please invite Aunt Johanna. She would be so happy to come. And maybe, you could find someone you can seat her next to.’ Nice try.

The music tore me away from my musing. The married couple was walking down the aisle. The choir was singing. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. ‘For He shall give His angels charge over thee, that they shall protect thee in all the ways thou goest, that their hands shall uphold and guide thee, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.’

Sigh. What a wonderful thought. Konrad would be this angel for Klara, just like she would be for him. This was the life and the love that Klara had dreamt of. And me, too. I sank into my inner cloud of kitsch and self-pity.

Upon recovering from myself, I joined the congregation’s procession out into the sunlight – and there, again, everything was perfect: The sun was shining, the bells were ringing. Klara was still stunningly beautiful (of course). Konrad was still attractive (of course). Granted – who cares about the looks of the groom at a wedding, anyway? As long as he puts on his suit and tie properly and with the front at the front and the back at the back, and manages to keep it clean, he meets all the key requirements. It was probably no coincidence that the basic word was ‘bride’ and the ‘bridegroom’ a deviation. Usually, the male form is the basis – heir and heiress, mister and mistress, governor and governess ... no, that was not right. Anyway: Adam first, then Eve, I guess. Only for the wedding, things were different. It must have been Eve’s idea. Apparently, there was a message hidden somewhere. But I did not really have time to dig for it.

I postponed the thinking and started taking photos of Klara and Konrad at the reception line, engulfed in a parade of smiles, embraces and good wishes.

Of course, Klara had a professional photographer, but she had asked me to take snapshots of the guests. Apparently, the photographer was also fine with this distribution of tasks, so that he only tried to push me away when I got too close to the married couple, sneering ‘This is my angle!’ While this was certainly not a friendly gesture among almost-colleagues, I understood that he had to make a living, after all.

I liked taking pictures at weddings, and given that I never participated in the main action, I had a wealth of practice. At weddings, everyone at least subjectively looks good, everyone smiles – unless they cry. But even the crying at weddings tends to be of the photogenic type. And behind the camera, I also did not have to worry about any photographers proudly presenting the atrocities they had been able to ban for eternity, claiming that the photo of me chewing too big a bite of my sandwich was one of their best works so far. Digital photography certainly constituted technical progress – but socially, it had taken us a big step back. While the legal scholars were still disputing how to protect privacy in the digital age, the bearers of this right frantically pilloried each other socially or at least aesthetically online. And they called this ‘social’. Just to make sure that the great-grandchildren, too, would see great-grandma enjoying her first drunken stupor. And while cautious people installed timers to pretend they were at home during their absence, they also spread the word on all available channels that they were on vacation, for two weeks, at the movies or just now at a wedding in Potsdam. Well, I did not have to understand everything that happened around me. Obviously, I was too old for that. Or too complicated. Or too simple.

I have to admit though, that when Sinéad and Bernd stepped forward, I was a tiny little bit tempted to just shoot whatever passed by my lens. I had met the two of them in the morning – briefly, but long enough.

‘Hi, I am Bernd. And this is my wife SinHead.’

Obviously, he loved his Sinéad so much that he felt she deserved her very own version of her beautiful name.

‘Nice to...’

‘I have known Konrad for years. I manage his insurances. Great guy. Here is my card. You never know, do you? Are you also a doctor?’

‘Thank you, that is...’

‘Actually, this is the second wedding for us, this week. And my SinHead looks stag-ge-ring, again. She easily gets one up on any bride.’

Sinéad took a deep breath to interrupt him, but he continued, ‘Darling, you do not have to be so modest. Don’t you agree that she looks just stag-ge-ring, Mrs ...? What was your name, again?’

‘My na...’

‘Well, anyway, I told her this morning ‘Darling,’ I said, I mean, ‘You just look stag-ge-ring. You are just the hottest ever.’ Well, that’s just a fact, she just looks stag-

ge-ring. Don't you agree that she looks stag-ge-ring?'

I hoped that Sinéad would punch him and send him stag-ge-ring, preferably right into a one-day-coma.

Naturally, Sinéad could look or be as hot as she wanted to for a proper assessment, I lacked both true expertise and investigative interest. But the mere question was completely misplaced. I would not begrudge her the fact that Bernd viewed creation as completed through his wife. But here and today, no Sinéad could be as gorgeous and beautiful as Klara, the radiant bride. Period.

And now, this stag-ge-ring couple approached Klara. Bernd was baring his teeth, his Sinéad was wearing a hat. Dark blue velvet. With a wide brim and a peacock's feather. And a huge bird dropping. Placed in the middle like a medal, well visible and still very fresh. I tipped Bernd on the shoulder and hinted at the portable bird loo. His complexion assimilated the bird poo's colour. He grabbed his Sinéad's arm and skeltered towards the parking lot. 'I told you not to wait under the tree with all the birds. Obviously, this had to happen, but, no, Madam has to sit in the shade, in direct shooting line. Shooting line? Shitting line! Because of Madam's delicate skin. Too stupid to sit. You know that I promised my boss to lend her the hat, tomorrow. And how are we going to get the shit off? That's velvet! Velvet! But don't count on me, you can do that yourself, Madam. You are just too stupid.'

Now, I almost pitied his Sinéad. On the other side, she had picked him among several billion men on this planet. Probably, he was the price you had to pay for being the pride of creation.

The newlyweds handshook, hugged and kissed through the parade one after the other, and I, too, got in line. Konrad first. He smiled. Inquiring. No, he could not have noticed my little escapism in church. Could he? Probably, he just didn't remember who I was. I put my hand forward. 'I am Johanna, Klara's friend from school. Hey, look after her. Klara is a very special person. Make her happy!' He ignored my hand, hugged me and placed a big kiss on my cheek. His beard was tickling. 'Of course! Johanna! Klara has told me so much about you. Sorry that I did not recognize you, at first. So many new people. No worries, I know how lucky I am to have Klara.' He pulled her towards him, they looked at each other and their looks merged. Can looks merge? It did not matter. At weddings, I tended to fall easy prey to kitsch. Again, I allowed myself to.

I whispered into Klara's ear. 'I am so happy for you. Be happy.'

She hugged me. 'I am. And next time, we dance on your wedding, Jo.'

That was too much. Now, I had to cry.

I hope you have enjoyed this little sample of my book. Do you want to know whether Jo will, indeed, dance on her own wedding?

Well, there is a whole book to read...