

## **I Do**

By Jo Salmon

I was always lonely here. Even as a child, it was always my parent's house and I was always lonely. No-one to talk to about it all. No-one to go to, to cry it all out, to tell how unhappy I was. To be unhappy was to be ungrateful and to be ungrateful was to be guilty and outside. An outsider. An unwelcome guest in my family's home.

Sometimes I had my own room but always with the knowledge that this could change at any time depending on new circumstances. New babies, new homes, new foster kids. These rooms were never really private spaces. After my mother found a song that I had written and asked me accusingly if this was how I felt, there was always the knowledge that the room could be searched for evidence at any time that I went out. Evidence of unhappiness. Ingratitude. So I didn't keep a diary. All my unhappiness I kept inside and, if my face ever betrayed me, I was asked why I looked 'so bloody miserable', I said I didn't know why. I still do that.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. I don't know.'

And often I don't. Or do I? It's just that I have never been allowed to express my unhappiness. Never learned how to. Been conditioned to hide it and keep it to myself. I don't want to seem ungrateful.

I was always lonely here. I am lonely everywhere. Any time that I am unhappy I am lonely because I can never speak about it. Am I guilty of ingratitude?

I climb the stairs of my parent's house to the room I am to share with my sister. Although the urge is to spend the night crying the unhappiness out of me, I won't. My sister might hear me and ask me why. I would have to answer, 'Nothing. I don't know.' I might seem ungrateful.

My wedding dress hangs on a hanger near the window. Its hideous ivory beauty mocks me, frightens me. From tomorrow and that day forward I must be a grown up. The cars are booked, the flowers arranged. The buffet has been paid for, the presents bought. The hen-night has been performed and the church has been cleared of God. Everything is ready, everything meticulously prepared. The build up to The Big Day has taken of everyone's precious time and hard-earned money.

And I have changed my mind.

'This time tomorrow you'll be a married woman' says my sister.

'I know. I'm so excited!' I say, trying to sound it.

'Goodnight then.' We say to each other.

I curl up in the single bed in a foetal position with my head under the covers and I suck my thumb. I want to feel safe and protected and loved but I don't feel any of these things. I feel exposed, raped. I pray to God to be my loving Father and to grant me comfort. He strokes my head and does his best to reassure me, telling me that all shall be well, but this makes me feel even more like a frightened, vulnerable, abandoned child and I start to cry quietly so that my sister won't hear me. I am so lonely. So frightened. So unhappy. I cry myself to sleep.

I wake early next morning to a quiet house. The sun shines cruelly through the window, forcing me into the memory that today I must be bright and cheerful. I lay in the bed and stare at the ceiling, willing time to stand still and not to stir the rest of the house into life and the chaos of a wedding day.

To other people it is all about the wedding. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, horseshoes and chimney sweeps. Who gets into what car and at what time and with whom. The Perfect Day. The Wedding Day.

I want to run away.

I want to be all alone on a ship, standing on the deck, looking at a vast horizon.

I must not make a sound. I must not wake the house. Today is the day that they give me away to another and the day I sign to say that I will love, honour and obey a man who is a member of the thought police. Who asks 'What are you looking like that for?', and 'what do you mean by that?' I still won't be able to keep a diary.

'He's so good for you.' They say.

'He gives you discipline.'

What do they mean by that? When was there a time that I didn't have discipline?

Downstairs, the telephone rings and I hear my mother's muffled, ruffled tones. The Wedding Day has begun. It has been agreed that the time to put on The Dress will be 2 'o' clock so I dress in jeans and a t-shirt, put on my bright and cheerful face and go down to find my mother in the kitchen.

‘But you *must* eat *something*.’ She says, ‘You’ve got a very busy day ahead of you.’ I make a promise to eat something when I get back. I have insisted on going for a walk alone, much to my mother’s horror.

I cross the road to the park and again find myself aboard a ship that is carrying me off to somewhere far, far away. I feel a calm melancholy and resign myself to the ever-present sadness. Dog walkers are worlds away from The Wedding Day, as are the wild geese on the lake and the breeze that whispers through the trees.

‘Where have you *been?*’ demands my mother when I reappear. I think she might suspect my feelings of wanting to disappear from the whole boiling. ‘The hairdresser will be here soon. Go and have a bath and put your dressing gown on, you don’t want to ruin your hair later by dragging that t-shirt over it.’

I do as I am told.

Panic and chaos ensue. The flowers are late and one of the bridesmaids has a chip in her nail varnish. The hairdresser tousles and pokes the sharp end of a metal comb into my scalp. I close my eyes and am back on the ship. I see the horizon, hear the cry of seagulls and the comforting hum of the ship’s engines.

My mother makes sandwiches. The telephone rings and dad wanders about, not sure where to put himself.

My hair is finished and I feel as though I have been tied up. Dad is watching the lunchtime news. I don’t know what to do now. I feel as if I ought to be joining in with the flouncing and flustering, losing things and finding them. Helping. I am afraid of having to sit still. I am afraid that my mask may slip and give me away. I might look unhappy. I might seem

ungrateful. If I sit still I might start to cry and my eyes will be puffy and red and my mother will say, 'That's the whole day *ruined!*'

I do my make-up myself. My mother does her make-up. The bridesmaids do their make-up. Dad flicks through the channels looking for more news while we swap eye-shadows and share lipsticks.

We have another coffee and it occurs to me that much of the rushing, hurried business of the whole day has been centred around the making and drinking of coffee.

'This will be your last one. You don't want to get coffee all down you dress'. My mother has a habit of telling me what I do and don't want.

And now it is time to put on The Dress. The Dress. The Dress that my mother chose and I spent months paying for. The Dress is the main reason that I am still going through with this journey into a deeper level of hell. I am alone while I fit it over a tight basque and suspenders. I look into the long mirror and see a young woman wearing a marshmallow straitjacket. My mother comes in and, with tears in her eyes, tells me I look lovely. She put my head-dress and veil on me. As she does this I close my eyes and find myself walking towards the rail of the ship.

My mother calls my sister in to take photographs. I feel self-conscious and conspicuous, as I would had they been taking pornographic shots. My dad comes in wearing his suit and tells me I look lovely. Then he stands next to me so we can have photographs taken together. I have an Idea that he feels as awkward as I do and, just for an instant, I feel a connection with him. We are united in our over-exposure.

We all sit in the chintzy living room, wearing chintzy clothes, stinking of perfume, too dressed-up and made-up to move and wait for the cars.

'Not long now.' Says my mother, from under her big hat.

'No, not long now.' Says my beflowered sister.

I close my eyes and stand improbably poised on the rail of the ship, my arms outstretched, feeling the wind rushing through my wild hair, feeling alive.

My mother and sister have gone now. Dad and I stand awkwardly silent while we wait for our car. I climb in carefully so as not to crumple The Dress. The ribbon tied over the bonnet of the car flaps about and the inside stinks of air-freshener and the flowers that have been carefully placed on the parcel shelf. I feel nauseous, sea sick.

'Alright?' asks my dad.

'Yep.' I lie.

On arrival at the church I stand at the entrance with my arm threaded through my dad's, waiting for the sound of The Bridal March, my cue to go.

I close my eyes. They move from the horizon and look at the cold, dismal sea. I take a deep breath...

And jump.