

Reinventing
Claire

by

Darion Wilk

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Reinventing Claire

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ONE

You would think Charlie would show me a little sympathy and wait for a day or two to tell me he wanted a divorce. But Charlie never was good at waiting.

I should have known in the morning that my continual misfortune was some sort of omen, a warning from some greater-being that today would get even worse. My breaking point hit me when the heel snapped off my favorite pair of shoes during lunch. I hunched under my desk, trying not to cry as I attempted to super glue them together and praying I could just go home to my husband. Lucky me, my boss called me into her office, promptly fired me, and I could go home just like I wanted. Except now I was unemployed, and I had to change a flat tire on the gravel covered shoulder of the freeway first.

I called Charlie on the way home, and he promised to leave work early and take me to dinner. 'To forget the day with a nice night out,' he said. Little did I know he had his own agenda for the evening.

There we finally sat – Charlie and me, at my favorite Italian restaurant, Linguini's. The plan, or so I thought, was to drown my sorrows over a bottle of wine and a plate of the best manicotti in town.

"I can't believe it. Not living up to my potential! What the hell kind of speech is that to fire someone with? Is it like the 'It's not you, it's me' excuse for employers?"

"You win some, you lose some I suppose," Charlie said, filling my wineglass for me.

"Six years there and nothing but glowing reviews, and she says I'm not living up to my full potential. And I said 'Thank you'. Who the hell says thank you for being fired?"

"You weren't thinking straight. Go easy on yourself, Claire."

"Well, I should be positive and look for that silver lining right?" I said, raising my glass in a halfhearted toast. If I had known what Charlie was about to spring on me, I probably wouldn't have been smiling.

Charlie sat there, slowly spinning his wineglass on the eggplant colored placemat.

"Is your lasagna okay honey? You've hardly touched it. Here, have some of mine instead," I said, already cutting off a portion of my manicotti.

"Claire, I want a divorce."

I froze, the hunk of manicotti on my fork in mid-air over his plate. "What—what did you say?" I barely managed.

He took the forkful from my hand and set it on his plate. "I said I want a divorce," he repeated in that dry, lifeless tone he always used when trying to be serious.

"Divorce?" I said, as if repeating it would somehow make it not real. "But you—we're having dinner and..." I muttered. I tried to fill my glass again, but my shaky hand hit the rim and sloshed wine all over the white tablecloth.

"I met someone else. And she makes me...well, happy. It's like, like I'm alive again!" He smiled, blotting the wine I spilled with a napkin in his calm, tidy way.

"Someone else? Alive again? What is that even supposed to mean?" *This has to be the worst joke ever. When will he give up on trying to be funny on bad days?* "This isn't funny, Charlie. I'm not in the mood for bad jokes."

"I'm not laughing, Claire. I'm trying to come clean—"

"Come clean? I just got fired, Charlie. We're having dinner. What do you mean someone else?"

"We've been together over a year now. I met her at a conference, and we kept running into each other after that. I didn't

intend to. You would like her though. But, well, we want to get married. So I want a divorce.”

I would like her. Has he gone mad? He can't get married; he's already married. “A divorce...” I whispered to myself, the words dragging across my dry tongue like sandpaper.

“To new beginnings!” He tried to chuckle, but sat staring at me for a moment with an unnerving glean in his gaze. “New beginnings...” He patted my hand as he stood. “Goodbye Claire,” he said, pursing his lips into the worst sympathetic grin I had ever seen. He turned and left me there, alone.

I sat there for, I don't even know how long, repeating the words in my head. I kept thinking he would come back and sit down, that he didn't just tell me he wanted a divorce. We would make fun of my former employer and her pear-shaped bubble butt and finish dinner.

I raised the cold manicotti to my lips, trying so hard to believe it didn't happen, that it was another ordinary evening out. But after a while I realized he wasn't coming back. His plate of half-eaten lasagna across from me reminded me I was alone. The big, wet red stain next to my hand where I spilled the wine after his announcement pounded the moment into severe realization.

“You guys want some boxes?” the waiter asked me, shaking me back into reality.

“He wants a divorce,” I said looking up at him with tears filling my eyes. The poor guy stood there for a moment, his wide eyes staring at the floor, before he seemed to scoot away. *A divorce? Will he be at home waiting for me, or did he...He probably went to her place.*

I started crying. And not the weepy, sniffle kind either, where you delicately blot a hanky to your eye. No, the snorty, heaving sobbing you only want to do locked in your bathroom with the shower running so no one can hear you. He wanted a divorce. He left, and *oh God, I left my wallet in my other purse! How am I going to pay for dinner? Did he take the car? I can't pay for a taxi.* I envisioned myself getting hauled off by the police, failing at an attempted dine-n-dash, crying as I called out for Charlie. I was never very good at rebellion.

A customer handed me her napkin, rubbed my back a little and said, “Are you okay honey?” I think I said something to her, but I don't really know what. Probably something profound like I said to the poor waiter. “I, my husband—and I—” I filled the napkin she

handed me with snot, and then another one. I muttered something else as she excused herself and flagged down a waiter.

After some apologetic mumbling to the waiter about not having my wallet with me, the manager called me a taxi despite my crying that I couldn't pay for it. He slipped the driver a wad of cash. I should have told him I only lived five minutes away and could walk if my feet weren't so sore, but instead I slid into the backseat without so much as a thank you. The driver asked me 'Where to' about three times before I managed to get my brain to cooperate with my mouth. I just wanted to get out of there as fast as possible but couldn't manage 'Just drive.'

"761 West 24th Street, please," I said, clutching the box of leftovers against my chest like a lifejacket.

The taxi stopped in front of my house, a sage-green Victorian with all the gingerbread house trimmings. We spent years working on that house, getting paint colors approved from the historical society, spending Saturdays at English Gardens for peach-colored rose bushes for the side patio. It was our baby. All the lights were off, and his car wasn't in the driveway. The whole house seemed to sag, the color dripping off the wood siding and vanishing into the grass.

"Lady, you gonna get out or what?" the driver said, leaning over the back of the seat.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," I said as I scooted across the dirty vinyl and opened the door. He peeled off and left me standing on the curb. I guess tonight was a good night to ditch me. *How can I go in there*, I thought, staring at my suburban beauty.

I trekked around to the backyard, by the Koi pond Charlie built last summer for my birthday, to get the spare key from under the sapphire looking rock. My keys were in my other purse too. I didn't think I needed them with Charlie driving. I walked back to the front door and let myself in.

The foyer felt cold, broken, and lonely. Just like me. It was like standing in a stranger's house. I crept into the living room, half expecting to see Charlie sitting there in his leather recliner, reading Forbes and waiting for me. But the room was vacant, just like my thoughts.

The house never seemed so empty, not even the day we bought it. We had broken open a bottle of champagne in the barren living room to celebrate our new path in life. I wanted to cry. I wanted to

call my sisters. I wanted to go find Charlie. *Maybe if I call him...* I sank into the sofa, still clutching the takeout containers in my arms, and sat in the cold silence of a broken marriage.

The answering machine startled me. *Did the phone even ring?*

“Hi, it’s Claire and Charlie. We’re not home right now...”

I shot up from the sofa and ran to the phone, hoping it was Charlie, crying and begging to come home.

“Hello?”

“Hey Claire Bear, I got your message. I can’t believe that bitch!” my sister said.

“Oh...Sam, I uh—”

“I could storm right down there, poke her in the eye with—”

“Sam, it’s really not a good time,” I said, my lifeless hand barely holding the phone.

“What’s the matter? You sound weird?”

“Nothing I, it’s just been a long day.”

“Well no shit. You got fired.”

“Sam, please,” I said, rolling my eyes. *I should have let the machine get it.*

“I can tell something’s wrong. What is it? Is Charlie giving you shit about it? Look, just tell him—”

“He’s not here Sam.”

“Where the hell is he? I thought you guys were going out to dinner?”

What time is it? It feels late. I glanced at the cable box, only seven o’clock.

“He, um, he had to go into the office.” I couldn’t handle Sam right now. God love her, but she would be like a crazed badger on the rampage if I told her the truth.

“Really?”

She knows me too well. “He forgot some files he needs to go over tonight I guess.” *That sounds believable, right?* “Big meeting coming up —”

“He could at least take you with him. Leaving you alone after the day you had, I tell you—”

“Sam, I’m tired,” I said, rubbing between my eyes. My head hurt like a jackhammer had been pounding on it all day so I dug through my purse for the Tylenol. I struggled with the damn childproof lid as I pressed the phone between my shoulder and ear. “Can we please do this tomorrow?” I said as the bottle broke open,

sending little white pills flying into the air. *Damn it*, I thought as tears filled my eyes again.

“Oh, all right. You sure you’re okay, you don’t sound—”

“I’m fine. I’ll call you tomorrow.” I bent over, picking up two pills off the floor.

“Okay, night, Claire Bear.”

I could tell her tomorrow, when I was done crying and could handle her berating my soon to be ex-husband. Not caring how early it was, I went upstairs to our bedroom. It was beautiful; I loved our bedroom. I decorated it in this sweet, country, shabby-chic motif. A big, puffy white comforter with a pastel flower print was the perfect touch with the gold headboard I bought. I found this gorgeous wrought-iron dress form at an estate sale. I’d never touched a sewing machine in my life, and would probably blow the stupid thing up if I tried, but the dress form looked great tucked in the corner by the window.

I loved coming in here at the end of a long day, curling up beside Charlie and listening to Jazz drizzle into the room from the bar down the street. It didn’t feel right in here, not now. It was one thing to go to bed alone when Charlie was on a business trip or after we had one of our stupid arguments and he slept on the recliner, when I knew it was only a matter of a day or two before he would be back in bed with me.

I couldn’t curl up in *that* bed, knowing he’d never sleep with me in it again. I grabbed a sheet from the hall closet and headed for the futon in the office, the one place neither of us ever slept. Maybe tomorrow this would make sense. Maybe Charlie would realize his mistake and come home with caramel lattes and a bag of apple muffins from Kate’s Kitchen. Some women got flowers when their husband screwed up, I got coffee and muffins. But I would gladly take it, if it meant he was coming home.

I changed into a pair of yoga pants and a blue tank top, pulled the sheet over my head and hoped tomorrow could somehow undo today. My heart jolted when I heard the phone ring, and I tossed the sheet off as I bolted up and fumbled across the desk for the phone. I knew it wasn’t Charlie. Charlie wasn’t coming home again. I curled up, buried my face in the lumpy spare pillow and let the scrunched up cotton muffle my frantic sobs.