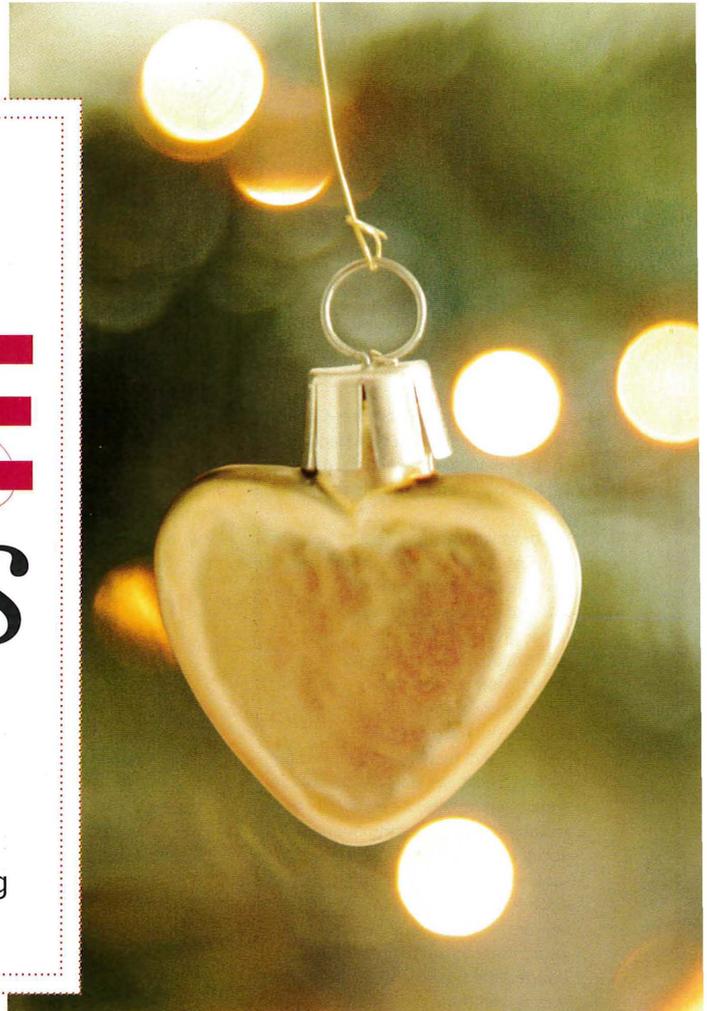


What **LOVE** means to me

Two writers, both in their forties, tell very different but equally compelling stories of love and marriage



"I'd never thought I was the marrying kind until I realised loving someone and being in love weren't the same"



For **MICHELE GORMAN**, marriage wasn't something she thought was for her until she met Andrew, then walked up the aisle last year at the age of 45.

The snow fell outside the window of our 17th-century hotel suite as we settled on the four-poster bed for a post-lunch nap. It was the first afternoon of our anniversary weekend – three years since we had met.

"Michele," Andrew said as my head rested on his chest. "Will you marry me?"
"Yes."

I answered without hesitation. That

surprised me because for 45 years, I'd never been the marrying kind.

That's not a judgement made by worried aunts, but something I know about myself. While my friends drooled over white dresses, I viewed weddings as expensive party invitations. Fun, but nothing I coveted for myself.

It's easy to say that's because my parents divorced. And it's true, in a way. Mum left Dad and, unusually, Dad raised my sister and me. But Mum was always there, and she taught me to be independent. Not bitterly independent, as in "I'd like to stab all men in the eye

with a salad fork", but happy with myself and confident about making my way in the world. She wasn't cynical about relationships. Neither was Dad. If they had been I might have been guarded or pessimistic but for me, relationships are a wonderful thing in their own right.

Following instinct

I had loads of single fun in my twenties and thirties, and three long-term boyfriends who never doubted my wish to remain a Ms. By mutual agreement, we had a strict Don't Ask, Don't Answer policy.

Then, at 42, I ended a decade-long relationship after, it seemed, waking from a deep slumber to realise that loving someone and being in love aren't the same thing. One seemed a poor substitute for the other.



I felt history repeating itself as I stood in my newly rented flat, surrounded by boxes. Mum had done the same thing, with the added complication of children and social stigma. It made me realise again just how brave she'd been to follow her instincts. My decision was easy by comparison.

Exciting possibilities

Once I found my feet in my newly single world, I did what everyone was doing – I went online. I was optimistic, excited and woefully unprepared. After six months of horror dates (and a few nice ones), I “met” Andrew. We drew closer with every email, and when we met in person, I felt I knew him already. He lived in the East End and I called the West End home, but it took just a few dates to know that we were kindred souls divided by a bus journey. I was excited by the possibilities.

Whenever I mentioned Andrew to friends, I said the same thing – it's so easy. There was no drama and no second-guessing, unwelcome disclosures or uncomfortable edges that needed smoothing away with compromise. It had all the ease of loving someone with the excitement of being in love.

And then he popped the question and I realised I'd never really been the unmarrying kind. I just hadn't wanted to marry the wrong person. We set a date. A DIY wedding, we thought, with all our friends and family involved.

They were thrilled for us, and as surprised by our plans as we were. Andrew, a few

years younger than me, had never been married either. Like me, he didn't see any reason to be. Then we met each other.

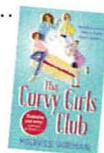
The wedding plans took shape and, together with our friends and family, we made 150 flower arrangements, handmade invitations and drool-worthy cupcakes. We decorated with hundreds of tea lights, tulle, rose-covered vines and fairy lights in the trees. They sang *Going To The Chapel* as I walked down the aisle. They DJ'd, sourced craft cider (Andrew is from Somerset), entertained on the piano, guitar, accordion and even didgeridoo. They designed

the lighting and sound, compered and captured the entire day on film. They made our wedding more special than I could have imagined. When I said “I do” to Andrew, I was nearly as overwhelmed with love for my family and friends as I was for him. So in a way I guess

my definition of love involves them too.

It's not about “finding my other half”. I'm not just one leg of a pair of jeans, or a wine glass that needs topping up. I'm already whole. And it's not “finding my companion”. Having someone who's only all right isn't enough. To me, love means sharing. Not finding because I was never searching in the first place. It means sharing my life, and all of me, with my equal, and knowing he's doing the same with me.

The Curvy Girls Club by Michele Gorman is out on 15 January (Avon)



With Andrew, there was no drama, no second-guessing, no unwelcome disclosures



Michele and Andrew at their “DIY wedding”, where friends and family got involved with the planning



Ciara and Frank married in Australia

“We know what the other will order in the restaurant but we haven't seen all of the world yet... we haven't taken it by storm”



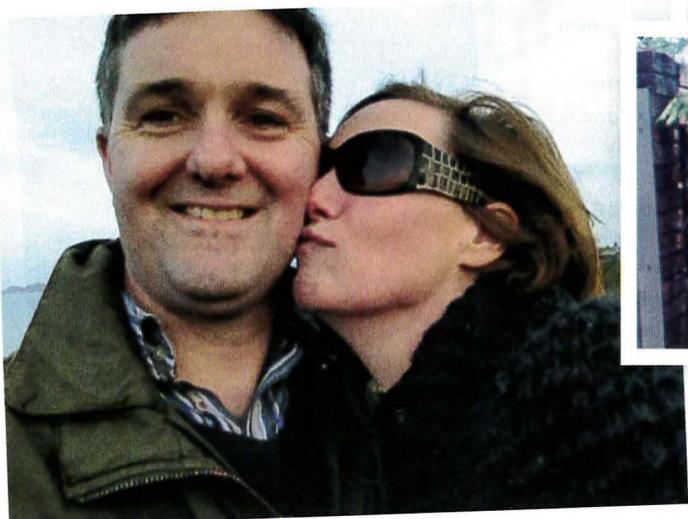
CIARA GERAGHTY, 44, met her husband Frank at the age of 18 and married him 20 years ago.

The first compliment my husband ever paid me was about my teeth. We had been going out for about three months and, one afternoon, he said – in an offhand, casual way, not quite looking at me – this sentence: “You have lovely teeth.”

I thought it was a strange observation but because compliments from him were thin on the ground, I accepted the gift with grace. Here's what I said: “Thank you.”

I got him for my 18th birthday. The older man. Nineteen. I met him in the pub and he asked if he could walk me home. He said his name was Frank and although he had a mullet, I agreed. At my garden gate, he said, “Goodnight” and I said “Aren't you going to kiss me?” And he did, and so it began.

Fast-forward 26 years, and here we are in our semi-D in the Dublin suburbs. We have acquired various items: a vacuum cleaner, a power hose, cake tins, a >>



Left: Ciara and Frank today. Above: Ciara (centre) with best women Trish Adams and Niamh Geraghty

cover for the ironing board. We have replaced our rucksacks with wheelee cases. We have a GP, a dentist, an orthodontist. Our numbers have swelled. Where once we were two, now we are five. Sadhbh is 16, Neil is 13 and Grace is six-and-a-half. We have adopted a dog, Heidi, a King Charles Spaniel, and the poshest thing about us.

All the time in the world

I'm standing at the kitchen sink that is full of cold, brown water with a greasy scum across the top because when my husband fills the sink with water, he forgets to drain it. Always. I have to get elbow-deep before I reach the plug and pull it. The J-cloth, which he has an aversion to rinsing, smells like E. coli. There are things I do that drive him around the bend. For example, the way I hang towels on the line – vertically, not horizontally; which is in abject opposition to his method – horizontally, not vertically – which, he claims, makes more sense.

When I proposed to my husband, I never thought about sinks full of murky, stagnant water. Or smelly J-cloths. It was five years after the tooth compliment. We had travelled to Sydney on a one-year working visa. Our plan was to see the world; take it by storm. We were overflowing with the intensity and passion of youth. Time was a myth. We thought we had all the time in the world, back then.

I worked for an investment company. I licked stamps and made coffee. My mouth tasted of glue and my coffee tasted like muck, since I'd only ever made instant before. He worked for a mobile phone company – data entry – and quoted reference numbers in his sleep. We lived in an apartment that was a little bigger

than the cardboard boxes that fridge-freezers come in. There was a sofa that became a bed. There were cockroaches in the kitchen cupboards but never any food.

Asking the question

I turned 24 in Sydney. We drank sparkly wine sitting outside a bar. I was full of warmth and sun and sparkly wine, and I looked at my friend with his dark hair and his blue eyes and his sunburn and his reference numbers. I looked at him until he noticed me looking at him. Then, making sure my teeth were prominently displayed in a smile, I said, "Will you marry me?" He said yes.

We got married seven months later in a little church on a hill in Watsons Bay. I forgot to take the sticker off the soles of my sandals so the 25 guests could see that they cost \$24.99. After the party, we returned to our tiny apartment and he carried me all the way up the two flights of stairs, then he read a poem by WB Yeats. It was a love poem.

We've lived in Dublin for more than 20 years now, we have a mortgage, I have an accountant, Frank has a power drill and a pension. He still works in telecoms, although he no longer enters data. I write stories in the day and read stories to my six-and-a-half-year-old at night. In the kitchen cupboards, there is food, most of which is within its best-before date. I am in a book club, he is in a craft beer club, I play the violin, he kayaks, I am a night owl, he is an early riser. My office is in

the attic, his is off the living room. We meet in the kitchen for mugs of tea at eleven. This is our time, when our ships pull into the same harbour. We can talk about anything. Anything. But mostly, we talk about the children, what to take out of the freezer for dinner, if the car tax is up to date, if it's true that, as I see it, taking out the bins is a "man's job".

After ten minutes, I go back to my office and he goes back to his. We don't play hooky as we might once have done. I never thought grown-up would happen to us but it did. Time is no longer a myth. It rushes past, much too quick.

We have recently celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary. We went out for dinner and I knew he would order the hake and he knew I would order the steak. He knows he needs to be quiet so I can hear the conversation of the couple at the table next to us. I know he is itching to comment on the football match he watched last night. I give him five minutes; time him with the stopwatch on my phone. One of my worries is that some day we'll turn into one of those couples who sit across from each other in a restaurant or a bar and stare into the middle distance. That happens. I've seen them, like ghosts of relationships past.

We haven't seen all of the world yet. We haven't taken it by storm.

When we get home, Sadhbh is on Tumblr in the kitchen, Neil is upstairs watching *Doctor Who* on Netflix and Grace is smiling in her sleep. We sit on the couch, after I pull

the plug in the sink and he rearranges the towels on the line so they hang horizontally, not vertically. We take out the wedding photographs and laugh at our youth. We remember how I was half an hour late. I ask if he ever worried I wasn't going to show. He says no. I ask if he still thinks my teeth are lovely. He says yes. And then I say, "Aren't you going to kiss me?" And he does.

Now *That I've Found You* by Ciara Geraghty is out on 15 January (Hodder Paperbacks) **w&h**

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