

Christian and Grace met at the University of Tennessee. Grace was studying American history and literature at the University of Kent, and her original plan was to spend a full year abroad. For Christian, who was studying business and was part of a student exchange programme, Tennessee was not his first choice. But somehow, they ended up arriving from different countries, and being in the same (slightly obscure) American university, at the same time, for one semester only. You could say the universe had a hand in their meeting. It was like it was meant to be.

They both smiled when remembering their first encounter. Grace had arrived the day before and spent the night in her student accommodation which felt more like a concrete cell than a bedroom and lacked any warmth or home comforts. Christian had flown in that morning and the group of international students were being driven in a minibus to a giant Walmart to stock up on essentials. Christian remembers with absolute clarity that it was a Tuesday, and that Grace was sitting at the back on the right of the bus. He wondered how he might start up a conversation with her.

Ginny

In a desperate attempt to spruce up her accommodation, Grace's essential shopping purchases ended up consisting of some of Walmart's finest home furnishings; a pink fluffy pillow and matching rug and an equally garish wall hanging, and instead of getting to sit next to her on the bus Christian ended up in conversation with Will, a diehard Everton fan, thinking that Grace hadn't struck him as a pink and fluffy kinda gal, and wondering whether she had managed to get any actual 'essentials'.

Nearly six years have passed since that early encounter and after the road trip to Walmart their friendship grew until eventually, they officially became a couple, just as the end of the Tennessee experience loomed close. To carve out some time together before they went back to their respective home countries, they decided to have a day just the two of them, hanging out. Christian suggested he ordered pizza, Grace was to bring drinks and dessert and when she showed up with a box of brownies to rival the size of the pizza, Christian told her, despite being only two weeks into their relationship, that he was going to marry her.

Obviously, the brownies and Christian's response to the brownies made an impact, as it took effort to figure out how to keep the relationship going. At first, it was long distance, lots of cheap Stansted flights and FaceTime chats.

Then Christian started at the University of Kent, but Grace, trying to play it cool, assumed they wouldn't see each other all the time. Christian had other ideas. Then we went into lockdown and the relationship went from those cross-continent, grabbed moments, to living in the same home in a very short space of time.

Despite the untraditional journey their relationship took, it soon had all the hallmarks of a Jane Austen novel, attachment, love, loyalty, and an acknowledgement of the importance of family and marriage. They each know what the other wants before they know it themselves, be that a warm coat or the right snacks, or when the other still has yet to vocalise something that is on their mind.

They possess the very fine quality of being content with what they have. They're aware that some might find their choices boring, but they both take comfort in predictability and stability, and love to please each other with small things such as a night in with spaghetti pomodoro, chocolate profiteroles and Harry Potter.

Both of them are very tidy and very organised. With not a thing out of place, the family have been known to observe that it's almost like nobody lives in their flat, and when Grace recently gave me a lift, I marvelled at the cleanliness of the car which looked like it had just been driven off the showroom forecourt.

Julia

Both love reading books, buying books, talking about books, talking about buying books, researching books, giving books as gifts, and buying bookshelves to house their treasures. They also love musicals and travelling, with travel books often playing a key role in their planning.

While most of us ask, "What do you want for your birthday or Christmas?", their question is, "Where are we going?". Travelling fulfils both their minimalist approach to possessions and their desire to experience some of life's most beautiful moments together. And since some of Christian's typical German productivity has rubbed off on Grace, something they both enjoyed doing independently before they met has now become something they do together – but with much more efficiency!

Ginny

If there is one thing that's slightly different between them it's Christian calm and laid-back response to Grace's stressed reactions to life's great questions: How will we ever be able to afford a house? Where will we end up living? Why aren't you worried about this? Christian thinks his practical responses might be a bit annoying, but they clearly complement each other and level each other out. And I have no doubt that they will work it all out.

Early on in their relationship Grace's stress levels reached new heights when Christian, having been invited by Heather and Brian to make himself at home in Malthouse Cottage, appeared in the kitchen, much to Grace's mortification, with a banana and a glass of wine that he had helped himself to. In true German fashion he had taken them at their word, but Grace was, in her own words 'literally mortified' at Christian's precise interpretation of the invitation.

But as with all successful relationships they found their stride, and the initial cultural differences became blurred the more time they spent in each other's family homes. They began to embrace the differences and are excited at the thought of raising bilingual children who will be able to live a multi-cultural life.

When I asked what they find attractive in each other, Christian loves that Grace is authentic and doesn't pretend to be something that she's not, and he facilitates her quirky habits and routines such as bedtime sleep spray, an episode of Friends and Harry Potter audio because he can, and because he finds it appealing. Grace loves that he still puts on the Harry Potter audio, even if she's fallen asleep during Friends.

Grace adores Christian's nerdiness, which is slowly showing itself more and more the longer they are together. It adds an extra element of fun to their travel planning when Christian is as interested in the seat configuration and spec. of the plane, as he is the departure time. And whilst Christian thought he was a pretty keen Harry Potter fan, Grace's knowledge is on 'another level' and one that he'll continue to aspire to reach.

But nerdiness and quirks aside, the adjectives they use to describe each other are very similar. Grace describes Christian as calm, caring and kind, although he's probably going to end up deskilling her through his thoughtfulness and desire to make her happy. She loves that he is un-materialistic, and that he never takes her for granted.

Christian says similar about Grace and adds that she applies these qualities to her work life as well as to her family and friend relationships, meticulously planning her lessons, becoming involved in the individual lives of her young students to the detriment of her own wellbeing sometimes, and emotionally investing herself in people and things that are important to her.

Julia

Looking back on some of their most valuable moments together often included the memory of a trip: the pre-Covid, moped-riding holiday to Vietnam, the mountain and forest adventure in the US in October last year in a van that was too small for Christian to lie down in, and the New Forest proposal weekend in December. The combination of sunshine and frost created a very romantic atmosphere, which was almost derailed by Grace's suspicion about why Christian was carrying such a large rucksack which he had taken to house the ring in its box.

Ginny

Everything about having a family excites them including recreating their own childhood experiences of travel, birthday parties, easter egg hunts and Center Parcs holidays. They're looking forward to there being cousins for their children to grow up with and share these experiences together. Grace looks forward to dropping the fiancée title, and they both look forward to the prospect of having a house large enough for a library.

And so this brings us to today. Grace confessed to Christian a while back that the thought of a huge wedding with all of the organising that that would entail, rather than being enjoyable to plan, was simply stressful to contemplate. She pondered on what it would be like, and how it would be received, to have an intimate wedding in a romantic chateau that was accessible to both families and with a commitment to keeping the guest list small.

Christian's response was simply to say that she should have the wedding that she wanted, and he'd be delighted with that too, and in no time, their research brought them to this beautiful place, Château Le Mas de Montet. I think you'll all agree it is simply lovely and we are all very fortunate to have made the guest list!

What is clear from being with Grace and Christian over the years, but particularly in sitting down with them to work through what to say today, is just how much they love each other, how well suited they are, and how they support each other to be just who they want to be.

Julia

Before we start the vows Angelika will share a reading with us.

Angelika

A good marriage must be created.

In a marriage, the little things are the big things.

It is never too old to old hands.

It is remembering to say "I love you" at least once a day.

It is never going to sleep angry.

It is having a mutual sense of values and objectives.

It is standing together and facing the world.

It is forming a circle of love that gathers in the whole family.

It is speaking words of appreciation and demonstrating gratitude
in thoughtful ways.

It is having the capacity to forgive and forget.

It is giving each other an atmosphere in which each person can
grow.

It is a common search for the good and the beautiful.

It is not only marrying the right person.

It is being the right partner.

Ginny

They prepared their own vows which they have exchanged privately and we will now move on to more traditional vows.

Julia

Christian, please repeat after me:

I Christian Luepke / take thee Grace Natalie Laverick Smith / to
be my wedded wife /

To have and to hold / from this day forward / for better for
worse / for richer for poorer / in sickness and in health / to
love and to cherish / till death us do part.

Ginny

Grace, please repeat after me:

I Grace Natalie Laverick Smith / take thee Christian Luepke/ to
be my wedded husband /

To have and to hold / from this day forward / for better for
worse / for richer for poorer / in sickness and in health / to
love and to cherish / till death us do part.

Julia

And now, you will exchange your wedding rings, to seal these
promises you have made to each other with a visible symbol of
the commitment taken today.

Christian, I ask you to take Grace's left hand and, as you place
the ring on her finger, please repeat after me:

Grace, I give you this ring / as a symbol of my love for you /and
my commitment / to this marriage