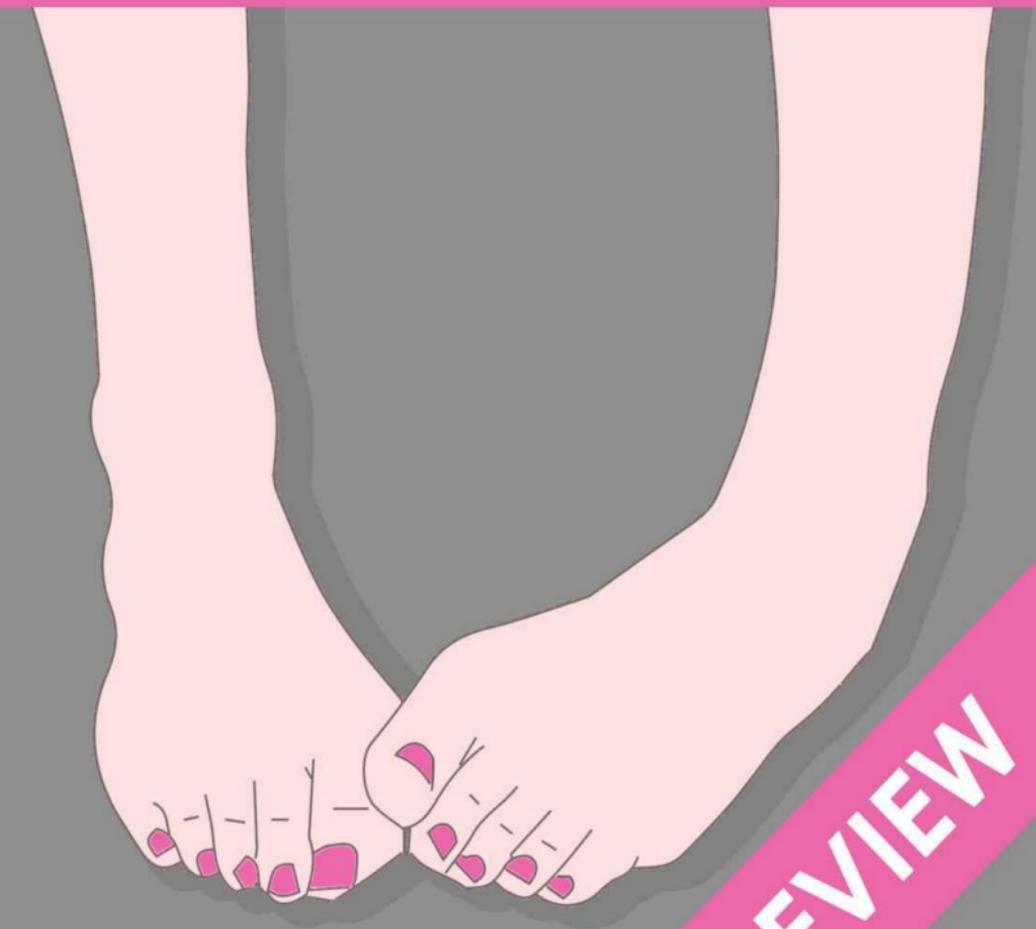


SHY FEET

SHORT STORIES INSPIRED BY TRAVEL



FRANCES M THOMPSON

PREVIEW

SHY FEET: SHORT STORIES INSPIRED BY TRAVEL

By Frances M. Thompson

Preview Copy: Published August 2013

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“We can’t behave like people in novels, though, can we?”

Edith Wharton, *Age of Innocence*

THE RUNAWAYS

“Run away with me,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

I blinked.

“Let’s run away and get married,”

Married. It wasn’t a shock to hear, but it still sounded foreign and forbidden.

“But we can’t. We can’t just go and...” I half believed it. *Where would we go? What would we do? What would they say?*

“Of course we can. Who’s going to stop us?” He had a determined smile, like a child.

Stepping in closer, he reached for my hand. The feelings I sheltered for him charged through me, thrilling and fulfilling. Surely that would never change?

“See. You can’t give me a reason why we shouldn’t.”

“My family...?”

“They love you, I love you. They’ll understand.”

I pulled away and sat down on my bed, feeling weighed down by the potential for disobedience.

“But where will we go?”

“I don’t know. Gretna Green?” He sat beside me.

“That’s so obvious. And a little tacky,” I squeezed his leg and felt the curved edge of his kneecap through his trousers. How I loved his skinny legs.

“We’ll go wherever you want. How about Bath? You said you loved it there.”

I went with my family a few years ago, when I was still living at home. The golden greystone of the Regency properties, the steam that rose from the Roman baths, the tearoom I ate too much coffee cake in. It was a happy day.

“Yes. Bath is beautiful.”

“That’s where we’ll go then,”

“How will we get there?”

“We’ll take the first train tomorrow morning.”

I glanced at my watch, the gold one my sister gave me for

my eighteenth birthday. "It's already tomorrow morning,"

"Even better!" He stood up. "I'll book us a taxi to take us to the station. We can spend the rest of the night in that greasy spoon opposite. We'll eat bacon butties and drink tea until it's time to catch our train,"

"And where will we stay in Bath?"

"In a hotel. The best, most expensive hotel we can find,"

"No, Johnny..."

"Yes. It's my treat," he silenced me. Everyone gossiped about how rich he was, but only I knew it for a fact.

"Okay."

"I'll be back," he said and then he was gone.

I took in a deep breath and wrapped my cardigan around me. Made of pure merino wool, it was warm and carried the smell of my perfume. I thought about Lucy next door, Debbie across from me and Georgie down the hall. This late at night they were most likely all sleeping thoughtlessly or watching TV in their rooms. I wanted to tell them - share my rebellion and my joy - but I feared even their reaction. Eloping to get married wasn't something that happened everyday on our corridor.

Johnny always told me I cared too much about what other people thought but that didn't dilute how excited I was by him and us. I thrived on our late night meetings, crossing corridors and using soft, secret knocks. I knew they talked about us, that we weren't as subtle or invisible as we thought, but that didn't stop me.

I opened my wardrobe and considered my clothes; so many new and unworn, so many too big, so many too small. I should have a clear out when we get back.

Coming back? I hadn't thought of that. I should have asked him what happens next, when we get back. It was the most important question and yet neither of us had even considered it. I shook my head and pushed it to the back of my mind. I told myself I was allowed to be happy. I was getting quite good at that.

"So, what does a girl wear on her wedding day?" I asked the wardrobe, putting on a silly voice. It answered by pulling my eye to a pale pink low cut summer dress with a floating hem that would dance in the lightest of breezes. It wasn't quite summer yet, but I would hope for sunshine.

Moments later I had a bag packed. I'd found earrings that used to belong to my grandmother and a lace shawl that Mum had given me for Christmas one year. As I folded it, I felt a little sad about them not being there to see me get married.

A tender tap on my door and there he was, wearing a grey

three-piece suit complete with a too-tight tie knot. I'd never seen him dressed like this before and it reminded me that he was a man full of surprises. I loved how he saw life as one big party after another and how he had an outfit for each one. Of course, I also liked how good-looking he was, with those kind blue eyes and his broad, giving grin. He made me feel lucky; lucky that he'd chosen me over all the other girls he could have had. I knew Debbie liked him and just the other week I found Lucy playing with her hair as they chatted in the kitchen. I loved him for choosing me.

There was an old brown suitcase by his feet. Nobody carried suitcases like that these days. I loved him for being different.

I kissed him firmly on the lips. It felt like the start of something.

"Let's go," I whispered.

* * * * *

He paid for First Class tickets and we settled into wide, upright chairs. Across from us a middle-aged man with a briefcase gave us an uneasy look before opening up a laptop and typing with few interruptions. I slipped my hand under

my future husband's and fell asleep.

* * * * *

Bath was more beautiful than I remembered. The buildings were taller, the hills steeper and the streets longer. I used to think things got smaller as I grew older. For once, it was nice to be proved wrong.

Our hotel was far grander than I liked to think about. I had almost no money to contribute to our adventure. Nonetheless, I smiled foolishly as I stroked the plump white towels folded in our bathroom and I squealed when he leapt onto the giant bed and bounced into me. How would we ever go back to sharing my single bed again?

I didn't ask how long we were going to stay but as he pulled me to him, his tie loosened already, I hoped for forever.

* * * * *

We gave notice for our marriage that afternoon. I clutched the confirmation so tightly it creased around my fingertips.

It was a mixed happiness as two numbers abruptly slowed the pace of our plans.

Seven was the number of days we had to live in the city before they would marry us. And fifteen was the number of days the notice needed to be displayed in the Registry Office before we could legally wed. They were bureaucratic necessities that reminded me of the real world and they made me question it all again. I asked Johnny if it was worth it. What about the hotel bill? What about those who would miss us and worry? Would they try and find us? What would we say afterwards? How would we tell them? What happens next?

He soothed my fears and made arrangements for us to stay and wait – new clothes, a backgammon board and a pack of cards. I made a series of lying phone calls home and to Debbie, saying I'd gone on an unplanned creative writing retreat and that's why I couldn't be reached on the phone in my room. They knew about my books and my secret ambition to be a writer; they showed no sign of surprise and certainly no concern. Johnny was right, I needn't worry...

In those fifteen days I learned that Johnny liked to sing Frank Sinatra in the shower, that he flossed every day and that he drank half an inch of whiskey in bed before turning the light off. We were slow to wake up in the mornings but

quick to never miss breakfast. Some days we took the train further west and I watched England's endless green blur into cities I'd never visited before; Bristol, Taunton and Weston-super-Mare. Most afternoons we took to strolling around Bath hand-in-hand, often ending up in the tearoom I remembered from my first visit. We made friends with the owner, a stout woman called Rosemary who wore mismatched floral prints and turquoise eye shadow. We shared our secret with her and she called us the "young lovers", forcing free cake on us during each visit. I feared my dress wasn't going to fit.

But it did. When the day arrived, it did.

Rosemary was one witness and the receptionist from our hotel was the other. Justyna was a young Polish woman with almost oval green eyes, like a cat. I didn't really like how she pulled her hair back into a severe high ponytail, but she always had a smile for us at the reception desk. She told us that she'd eloped to get married too, when she was 17 and he was 19. They'd just celebrated their fifteen year anniversary. Her husband was a chef in our hotel. We felt like she understood and she took the morning off work to be with us.

We were due to be married at eleven o'clock in the morning and when we left the hotel, taking a taxi to the Registry Office, the air outside was crisp and cool. I buttoned up my favourite cardigan and wrapped the shawl around my shoulders. I'd bought a new lipstick to match my dress and when I checked my reflection in a small pocket mirror, I made a vow to wear lipstick every day of our marriage.

Justyna had stolen some white chrysanthemums from the hotel restaurant's dining tables and she gave me five to hold in a bunch. With shaking hands, I pinned another to the lapel of Johnny's three-piece suit.

The flowers suddenly made everything real. As soon as I was holding their long thin stems in my hand and walking down a short, carpeted aisle, I felt like a real bride. I stopped questioning everything and focused on the vows I was making, feeling wonderfully responsible. And when Johnny's voice cracked as he said his vows to me, I felt a big, exotic happiness fill me up, like a balloon about to burst. The simple gold bands we'd chosen were identical in every way but size and the metal was still warming to my skin when Johnny took my hand in his and we walked away as husband and wife.

The sun was shining when we stepped outside and Justyna took a photo of us on her phone.

"I'll send it to you," she promised. I didn't even question how. I was still not questioning, just living.

"You both look so happy," Rosemary said and she reached her arms out, enveloping us.

We returned to the tearoom to celebrate with our witnesses. Champagne, tea and cakes were waiting for us on a table where a shiny silver balloon hovered above. "Just Married" it said, and we were.

“Congratulations Mrs. Malcolm,”

“Congratulations Mr. Malcolm,” Our glasses chimed together. “I can’t believe we did it.”

“And how does it feel to be married?”

I remembered the first time I met him on the day I moved in. I felt so out of place. Surely I was too young to be there? As Johnny opened the door for me to walk down the corridor, I saw a glint of the same dissent in his eyes. That evening as I was unpacking, he knocked on my door. He’d brought with him a potted pink orchid and a bottle of Merlot as a welcome gift. I invited him in to play backgammon.

“It feels amazing. Amazing. Naughty. Wonderful.” I looked down at my ring. “Though I’m not sure this one will last as long as my first.”

He covered my married hand with his. “I should hope not. I am eighty-two, you know.”

“Well, we’ll see what happens,” I said, feeling none of my eighty-five years.

“They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they never recovered.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*

THE FLOWERS SLEEP TONIGHT

Him

Finding her was easy. Approaching her was not.

We made “friends” on the night we met, thanks to an Internet connection and an app on our phones. Like me, she has people that she needs to keep in touch with, so I was able to keep my eye on her from that moment onwards. And when I felt the time was right, I made sure I saw her again. I didn’t even have to change my plans much. I was back in Europe. She was just a flight and a little organisation away.

I was called an “old romantic” seven times today as I flashed her photo in the faces of hostel owners. Yet none of them would tell me if they’d given her a bed to sleep in. None of them even seemed that keen to help me, despite my wide smile and clean shirt.

Foiled and frustrated, I began walking back to my hotel so I could go back to the Internet for answers. With each step, I felt Barcelona’s late summer heat rise through its pavement and bursting bubbles of sweat quickly dirtied my shirt. I started thinking that I would never see her again and that I would never get to finish this. It was then that my old friend Fate stepped in, as he often does.

There she was, literally crossing my path.

She walked out of a shop door ahead and sauntered away from me. I checked for the skinny ankles, the silver bracelet on her left wrist and the bouncing blonde hair. It was her.

El Born's narrow alleyways allowed me to follow at a short distance. I watched her meander without a map, her pace slow and her feet happy to pause in front of graffiti-covered doors and shop windows. When she reached a square and looked around her, I hung back in the shadow of a shop awning and lit a cigarette. She eventually sat at a table and that was when I started to notice the changes in her.

When we first met she sat in on herself, folded arms and downward eyes. Back then, she was still finding her feet as a solo traveller; she didn't yet know the liberating power of time alone in a foreign land. You can't teach people that joy; that pure pleasure of taking time to roam the world by yourself, doing exactly what you want, what you please, what you love to do. But now she knows. Her back was flat against the back of the chair and her head was tilted up to the sun. She was in no rush. She was content. And she was very much in public.

Maybe this was going to be harder than I thought.

Her

There is only so much travel a girl can take.

I felt it grow inside me like a tumour; the realisation that I don't want to travel anymore. It happened gradually but now I am swamped with symptoms. Everything I hear is tinged with a high pitched shrill and my insides ache from too much alcohol, too much sugar, too much too much. Seventeen months, twenty-eight countries, one hundred and twenty-seven different beds; it's too much and I give in. I fold. Travel has lost its spark, its charm and its preciousness.

I am full of experiences, but I am empty of energy.

Thailand, Cambodia and Laos you were a trio of goodness to me, my mind and my bank balance, but you were lousy for my liver.

China, you blew my mind, not always in a good way.

Japan, you kept me longer than you should have. That's a compliment.

India, you ruined my insides but enriched my soul; I've never seen colour or chaos like you.

Brazil, you were a welcome detour, opening doors to the continent that changed my understanding of passion. For passion is not just what happens when the lights and your clothes go off, passion can and should be found in the everyday things that enrich your life; the wine you share

with a friend, sitting down to a family meal or singing along to your favourite song, no matter how badly.

In Mexico, I rediscovered the calming sensation of sand between my toes and sun on my back. Your beaches were beautiful but your nights were boozy and I have the awkward memories of a German guy - whose name I forgot - to prove it.

Europe, you felt like home, but a more mature version. It's you who made me start to slow down. Trips went from days to weeks and I followed my dreams without consideration of the cost. I climbed your Alps in Switzerland, I saw Greece's infinite islands from the side of a boat and I ate Italy's sun-blessed food with delicious abandon.

And now I'm drowning in the noise and smells of Spain, a country I thought I'd love but am struggling to even like. But I know it's not Spain, it's me.

Surrounded by the bustle of Barcelona - an unforgivingly alive city - I feel at peace with what I must do. I can feel the pull. I must return to my little big island on the other side of the world.

I needed calm and quiet to come to these conclusions. The hostel wasn't a bad one. It was clean and my earplugs kept me asleep, but this morning I waited many minutes before opening my eyes because I didn't want to wake up and see another stranger. Instead, I lay still, praying for solitude and

letting a few tears slip down onto my musty pillow.

It took me twenty minutes to pack up, pay up and leave. An hour later, I was lying on the cool cotton sheets of a four-star hotel bed. Apparently privacy costs 150 Euros a night in this town; the same price as three weeks in a Thai beach hut. I handed over my credit card without blinking.

The room wasn't perfect but once the door was closed, it was paradise.

Him

I'm not sure if I fell in love. I don't think so. I've been in love before, when I was eighteen years old. It was wonderful and horrible. I couldn't see straight for weeks after it ended. I said never again. But as soon as I saw this woman with wild hair and a curled smile, I felt something wake up inside me.

The moment she went cold on me is a vivid, frozen memory. I was inside her and I was so aware of it that I couldn't catch a breath, let alone move with any grace or tenderness. I knew what was wrong; I cared. I cared for her and I didn't know why. I barely knew her. How had she tricked me into caring?

It left me stilted and almost paralysed. She turned her face to the side and didn't look back until it was over.

The following morning she was gone. Nobody knew where or why. I spent the next few days searching other hostels and hotels. It's maddening that I had to use the same photo and broken Spanish today. It shouldn't have taken me that long to realise she'd left to escape me.

That was when I got angry and I knew I had to find her.

Her

I chose an empty table and waited to find out which of the square's restaurants was going to look after me. A waistcoated man with a dark frown eventually approached and I ordered quickly. The Rioja was fiery, the *patatas bravas* left my lips tingling and the chorizo was beautifully blood red.

My plates removed and my belly full, I started to daydream about the ocean and how its cool spray would linger on my face when I walked my mother's dogs along Curl Curl beach. I imagined my sister up on the Central Coast, raising chooks and children against the soundtrack of the kookaburra. I could return to either of these places to reclaim a life, or I could set up in a place of my own. Melbourne or Perth, perhaps? On my own. I was starting to think I'd be okay with that.

My thoughts were interrupted by a foreign voice speaking English and I assumed it was the waiter offering me coffee. But when I looked up, there was the shock of a familiar face.

Him

“Can I sit down?”

She blinked and it seemed to shimmer down her body. It was a shudder; she recognised me.

“May I...?” I asked again.

Her mouth gaped open, but she gestured to the chair next to her.

“Thank you.” I sat and smiled. “How are you?”

“I’m... I’m okay,” she replied in a whisper. “How...” She coughed. “How are you?”

“Good. Thank you.” I kept my backpack on my lap because of what was inside. I knew she’d forgotten my name. Maybe she never knew it.

“Well, this is a... coincidence.” She reached for her glass of wine, her lips twisting into a smile I’d never forget. I ordered a beer.

“No, it is not a coincidence,” I said.

Her forehead gathered in a frown and I noticed new freckles on her nose.

"I knew you were in Barcelona so I came here to find you," I explained.

"You came to find me?"

"You left Mexico so quickly after we... after we were together. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye."

She leaned back abruptly, knocking her back against her chair. "But Mexico was... It was just a... Mexico was a long time ago."

"Five months and three weeks." I let the time hang in the air.

Her

"It's Thomas, isn't it?" Memories started to flood back in uncomfortable, wild waves.

He nodded, pretending to not be hurt.

"So, what are you doing here?"

"I told you. I saw that you were here and so I came to find you."

"From Germany?"

“No, Italy. I was working there, but my contract finished yesterday.”

“What do you do?” I didn’t have the first clue.

“I’m a cameraman.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and I also do some other things, film producing and editing.”

“Like, for movies?”

“Kind of. Well, no. Not big films. Not Hollywood.” His nose twitched when he smiled. “Some short films for friends. But I’ve actually been trying to do other things too so I can work as I travel.”

“You didn’t go back to Germany after Mexico?”

“No, I’ve not been back to Germany for over two years.” I noticed that his eyes were very dark, almost black. They clashed with his mousey crop of hair.

“You’ve been travelling this whole time? And working as you go?”

“Yes.”

“And what are these other things you’ve been doing?”

“Photography, that’s what I want to do. And it’s much easier to do while I keep travelling. I don’t need to look for contracts. I just have to sell my photos.”

I pinched the stem of my glass. My cheeks were warm from the wine, but I was thinking clearly. He scared me, just like he did in Mexico. I ran away from him back then. I could do it again, if I wanted to. This time it would be easier, I knew where I was going next. I was going home.

“And you never go home?”

“Define home...?” He faced me and I felt his stare slice into me. I shivered again despite the warm, sticky air that cloaked us.

“So, are you any good? At photography?” I changed the subject.

“Would you like to see some of my photos?” he asked, his eyebrows raised high over those deep, dark eyes.

Him

Now was the time. Now was when I did what I came to do. Five months, three weeks, two days. I was within breathing,

touching, finishing distance of her. It was time to show her.

Her

I thought he was nothing but a boy with a backpack, but it turned out he has a story too.

He pulled a large black camera out of his bag and carefully held it in one hand, in a way a man would hold a baby – close to the chest, bicep engaged, careful to support the head. He switched it on and passed it to me so I could see the screen on the back.

“Push that button to go forward,” he said and then he went to find the bathroom, leaving me alone with what I believed to be his most treasured possession.

I scrolled through many months of his travels. Sunrises, sunsets, cities, people, landscapes and buildings – some I recognised and some I didn't. I smiled when I saw the Eiffel Tower at night. I nodded in admiration at his capture of Christ the Redeemer, wondering for a second if maybe he'd followed me there too. I zoomed in on the face of a monkey perched on a brick wall high up on the rock of Gibraltar. His photos had character and told more stories than my own. I just hoped my memories would stay as colourful and well composed.

With a few more pushes of the button, I saw a familiar scene; Mexico's white sand and bottomless blue waters. It

was our beach, the one we all spent so many hours on. I saw our favourite bar, our collection of sun loungers and the hammock we all took turns in. There were the two British girls who began each day with a beer and a burrito, the Swedish couple who were as brown as the locals and the boys from Virginia whose southern drawls would increasingly slip and dip, the more margaritas they drank. Thomas' camera brought it all back – the sweet camaraderie and the tight tingle of my skin being kissed by sunshine all day long. One photo zoomed in on a fresh coconut with a pink straw sticking out of it. I recognised my hand grasping it. The details were so clear I could almost taste the blunt sweetness of the juice and feel the soft flesh on my tongue.

The next photo was of me - my profile and the curve of my neck. I am in the beach bar we would all congregate in and I am looking and laughing straight ahead of me, out to the ocean. Thomas and his camera are on my left. My side profile looked strangely unfamiliar. My nose didn't stick out as much as I thought it did. There were more freckles on my cheeks than I expected and my eyelashes were fuller and darker than I'd ever given them credit for. My chin protruded in a deep grin, but I liked it. I was pretty when I laughed.

It was then that I realised why he'd come to find me.

Him

As I returned to the table I noticed her shoulders had sunk

back into her body, as though she had relaxed into my being there.

My camera was on the table and she had wrapped the strap around her wrist.

“Should I order another beer?” I asked her permission to stay.

Her

I got drunk quite quickly. Adrenaline will do that; even to a hardened drinker like myself. But we talked too. We shared stories about the places we'd been in those five months and three weeks and we compared travel experiences; the good, the bad and the ugly. We compared passport photos and counted stamps; he had many more than me.

From the restaurant we moved on to a smoky bar that was playing a mix of songs in different European languages. Thomas sang the German hip-hop songs to me and when he danced I could see that he had rhythm. Had I not noticed that before? I drank more wine, some beer and downed two toxic shots of tequila that I insisted on buying for us. My legs began to turn warm and wobbly and eventually holding his arm was all I could do to keep standing up. I found looking up at him helped stop the world spinning around me.

The sun was showing its first signs of waking when we

stepped outside. I thought about the hotel bed I had paid for but not yet slept in. I whispered my address into his ear. "It's a ho-tel," I over-announced.

He slipped his arm around me and we began to walk down a cobbled street I didn't recognize.

"You must tell me this," he leaned down and breathed into my ear as my feet overlapped his. "Why did you leave so quickly? In Mexico. Was it so bad, being with me?"

"Thomas, I will be honest with you," I slurred. "I don't remember."

He nodded and forced a closed smile, but his grip on me stayed strong.

Him

We wobbled on together. I didn't start up a new conversation. Instead, I lit a cigarette and waited. Finally it came.

"I ran away because I shouldn't have slept with you," she said and knocked her head against my arm. "I promised myself that I wasn't going to mess around with any men while I was travelling."

"Why?"

“Because a man broke my heart, back in Australia, and I needed to fix it. My heart... I needed to put it all back together.”

“What did he do?” I slowed us down and she began to bend in to me.

“I fell in love with him when I was very young. Too young. I was seventeen. He was so, I don’t know, dreamy. I know that sounds stupid but he was all I wanted back then. And I couldn’t believe he loved me too. Then three years ago, when I was twenty-four - still too young - he got down on one knee and promised me a lifetime of happiness. Of course, I said yes.” She smiled at me as if I was that guy. “Two weeks before our wedding day, he slept with this slutty, bogan girl from his work.”

I couldn’t tell if she was about to cry or laugh. Her eyebrows were knotted, but her lips arched upwards.

We started walking again. She was getting more and more unsteady on her feet. I didn’t really know what to say.

“What’s a bogan?” I asked eventually.

Her knees folded as she began laughing loudly. I held her up as best I could, until my arms weakened too and we crumpled to the ground. We became two more drunken travellers in Barcelona, claiming our corner of a dirty street.

She was leaning on my thigh and I could see where her tan faded on the inside of her forearm. I rested my head on top of her hair thinking it would be comfortable but her curls tickled the tip of my nose. I kissed the crown of her head before getting up and pulling her with me. I needed her to sober up.

Inside a kebab house she told me the full story and her words revealed both pain and peace. I wanted to tell her that I understood; that I knew how hard it was to try and erase somebody from your thoughts, when you'd made them such a concrete constant. But I didn't. Instead, I told her that the guy was an asshole.

Once she was finished eating and talking, I gathered what was left of our feast and put it in a bin. The place had filled with chattering Spanish girls in tall platform shoes and it was getting too noisy to talk.

"Come with me, I want to show you something." I held out my hand and she took it instantly.

Her

We were walking down a busy road. Even in those small hours there were people and cars and mopeds everywhere making noise. So much noise.

"I'm going home," I shouted over it all.

“Home?”

“Yes. Australia. To my family. To my friends,” I stuttered into him. “I’m tired of travelling.”

“Sometimes I feel like that too.”

“Would you ever stop?”

“Maybe one day,” he pulled me in to avoid a group of young men spilling out of a club.

“And would you go back to Germany?”

“Maybe, yes. One day.”

We kept walking past more people, more cars and more noise.

“Where are we going?” My eyes felt sticky with tiredness. I wanted him to take me home.

Him

“Parc Montjuic,” I told her. “This way.”

We walked and climbed in silence, up the dusty side paths and across the open terrace that I knew offered beautiful views of Barcelona when the sun was up. I led her down the

stone staircase close to the cable car station. Her hand felt both plump and delicate in mine.

There was no one else when we got there and I was glad. It was a small seating area tucked under the staircase, a secluded small garden that people can spend time in alone, if they knew where it was. I guided her to the bench that faced the flowerbed and she sat, shuffling her feet in the chalky ground. It was not a lush, green garden but a space that had been burnt by the city's long hot summers. But it's a place where a little bit of magic happened and I wanted to show her.

I began to unpack my bag and assemble my tripod and camera. She rocked gently forward to watch me.

"Look closely," I pointed to the flowerbed.

"What am I looking at?"

I pointed to the stumpy green shoots that filled the flowerbed.

"These flowers," I explained. "They are about to wake up."

"They're not flowers," she pouted.

"Not yet. Wait."

Her

I stumbled to look closer at one of the buds and inside its green enclosed shell was the tiniest dash of pink. “They’re asleep?”

“Yes. They close up when it gets dark and when the sun rises they begin to open up again.” He clicked his camera on top of a small tripod that didn’t look strong enough to take its weight. Satisfied with his set up, he sat down next to me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, yawning.

“Making a video of the flowers waking up. In time-lapse.”

“Oh.”

I couldn’t help it. I laid my head on his shoulder and gave in.

It could have been minutes or an hour later, but when I opened my eyes again I was looking at the sleeping flowers sideways. I’d fallen into Thomas’ lap and he was sat quite still looking straight ahead. I sat up and leaned forward.

He was right. I saw orange, pink, yellow and red scruffy petals squinting up at the rising sun. They weren’t the prettiest of flowers, but they were flowers nonetheless. I suppose even flowers don’t look their best when they’ve just woken up.

He moved to disassemble the camera from its tripod.

“But they’re not fully open yet,” I said, my voice croaking.

“You’re tired. Come on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“I want to watch!” I stamped my foot like a child.

“You can always come back.”

“No, I can’t. Barcelona is too far away from Australia, I can’t come back...”

“Yes, you can. You can go wherever you want to go. The world is your...”

He searched for the word as he zipped his bag up.

“The world is your...” he tried again.

My eyes had started to close again. *Oyster, Thomas. The world is my oyster.*

“Sleeping flower. The world is your sleeping flower,” he said.

I felt his arms slide under me and I was lifted up.

I stirred a little on the way, pulling my key card out of my pocket and whispering the floor number. But I was quick to fall back asleep again and again. Eventually I woke long enough to see that I was back in my hotel room, fully dressed and lying on the bed. The curtains had not been pulled and I could see the sun was still advancing upwards. I lifted my head and looked around, sensing I wasn't alone. I saw his backpack on the ground by the desk and I could hear water running behind the bathroom door. I fell back asleep hoping that he would stay.

Him

My grandmother always told me to be honest with women, to respect them and to listen to them. The love of a good woman is the key to your happiness, she said. My grandmother never owned a passport and only loved one man her whole life, even after he left her. She taught me to dream big and to go see the places I wanted to see. She also told me to never go to bed on an argument. Never leave with unfinished business. Never stay angry. Anger will eat you up inside, she said.

I carried her home. It was a pleasure.

Her

One week later, I was sat in Heathrow airport waiting for the first of three flights home. The thirty hours of recycled air and airport corridors I faced filled me with doom, but it

was a bridge I had to cross to see the frangipani trees that lined my parents' street and to hear my niece call me Auntie.

A crackled voice sounded out and those around me started to shuffle their bags and bodies into a disorderly queue. I was suddenly in no rush to join them.

"You're the same as me," the man beside me said, an accent tilting his words. "There's no need to rush. We already have allocated seats."

He was pointing to a boarding pass tucked into the red leather skin of his passport. *Reisepass*, it said. I glanced up to look at him.

Him

I had an urge to call my grandmother.

I wanted to tell her another story from my travels. This one was about the Australian girl curled up next to me in a Barcelona hotel. I wanted to tell my grandmother about the childlike way she slept, her bottom lip pouting and her hands rolled into fists. I wanted to tell my grandmother how this girl's laugh sang out in a different voice to the one she spoke with; an octave higher and sweeter. My grandmother would have told me that I did the right thing trying to find her again and she would have soothed me into realising that yes, I had fallen in love, and that was okay.

It was just like the months that followed her death; driving to her empty house, dialling her disconnected number and always expecting her to call me back. Before she left, I would never have described us as close, but I learnt the hard way just how much of a pull my grandmother had on me. She pinned me to the ground with purpose, pride and love. And when she went, I began to float away, like a kite cut loose. Never one to fight, I followed that instinct, sold everything I owned and bought a round the world plane ticket.

It was already deep into the following day in Barcelona, when I realised I wasn't going to fall asleep despite being very tired and a little drunk. I had all these stories to tell, but no one to tell them to. Even with her skin on my skin as she slept beside me - a purpose, a love, a pin - I'd never felt more like that kite, flapping alone and adrift, wild and free.

I wrapped one of her blonde curls around my finger and for a quick moment, I considered chopping it off to take with me forever. But I didn't. Instead, I kissed her forehead and waited for morning to come.

Her

"Exactly," I agreed with him. "I'm in no rush to get on this plane. It's such a long flight..."

Reisepass, it means "pass to travel", he'd explained when

we'd compared embarrassing passport photos. What a perfect word for a passport.

"Me neither, though I am excited to see what Australia is like." He clutched a backpack on his lap. "I've never been before."

I smiled and wished the German stranger beside me a great trip. I then stood up to board my plane home, alone.

“It is the nature of the strong heart,
that like the palm tree it strives
ever upwards when it is most
burdened.”

Philip Sidney

SHY FEET

Part One

Thirty-seven years ago, I was born into debt. I arrived two weeks early, surprising both my mother and the woman whose hair she was cutting. Before I'd even entered the world, I owed my mother the price of her customer's leather loafers.

Thirty years ago, a teacher told my mother to keep an eye on me. I was "frighteningly astute" and "abnormally self-aware" for my age. In other words, I was going places.

Twenty-eight years ago, I paid my mother back for those leather loafers with money I made from selling jars of jam to our neighbours. Every Sunday evening I would stand on a stool in front of our gas stove and stir a viscose pink liquid around a giant saucepan. Behind me, my mother would hold her breath as I poured the hot mixture into jars, never spilling a drop.

Twenty-six years ago, I began secondary school. Within weeks I learnt that with very little effort I could get top marks in most subjects. I rarely studied more than I had to and I blitzed through my homework on the school bus home. While Mum finished work in the front room, I

cooked dinner for us both, listening to her scissors snip through her comfortable conversations with clients. I spent the rest of my evenings with one of the seven books the library let me borrow each week. The day they increased my weekly allowance to ten books was a day I'll never forget.

Twenty-two years ago, I helped Mum expand her hairdressing business. I put adverts up in the local newsagents and my mother began training up a team of local girls, helping them to get clients for a percentage. I managed their diaries and their accounts for a small fee. Within four months she had enough money to buy the colour television she'd always wanted.

Twenty-one years ago, Mum and I went abroad for the first time. We took the ferry to France and watched England disappear from the windy top deck. I spoke French to find our bus stop, the hotel and a cosy restaurant for our first night in St Malo. We ate *moules-frites* and Mum let me drink red wine that made my legs feel numb and fuzzy after the second glass. The shells of the mussels swam in a bright yellow juice and it took many days before my fingertips lost the smell of garlic. I remember feeling sad when we had to board our bus back to the port, like I'd only read the first page of a beautiful book.

Nineteen years ago, I arrived at Cambridge University with a suitcase that squeaked as it rolled along behind me. I studied Economics and found that I was still able to complete the required work in a fraction of the predicted time. I spent what remained of my days learning computer

programming so I could build software to manage my first business, an introduction service for non-English speaking students who needed proofreading services and English lessons, which other British students provided. I called the company International Student Support, ISS, and despite three months of thorough market research, I was astonished at how much money international students had at their fingertips to spend. That summer I hired an accountant for my Mum's business and a temporary manager for ISS so I could travel the length of South America alone. I learnt how to speak Spanish and how to savour good food; by eating it with people you love - in this case three generations of a Chilean host family I lost touch with too quickly.

Sixteen years ago, I spent a year studying at Brown University in California. It was the first time I took the sun for granted and my hair turned golden as a result. I learnt short hushing Arabic words from the Ph.D. student I fell in love with there. At the end of the spring semester, he whisked me away for a holiday at his family's mansion on the rugged outskirts of Marrakech, a city I swayed from loving to hating and back again. I found the crowded Medina alleyways as dirty as they were mysterious and I lost count of how many skinny cats trotted at my ankles. I felt upset when Amir was too proud to acknowledge them and I promised myself if I ever moved to Morocco with Amir that I would never ignore these cats, even if I couldn't help them.

Fifteen years ago, I returned to Cambridge and finished my degree. I was awarded a First. My graduation was a day of misty eyes and sparkling wine as I took Mum for a punt along the River Cam. I hired more staff to work for ISS and

slowly the business needed less of me. In the September of that year I returned to California carrying everything I owned, but Amir didn't show up. Over the phone, in an airport motel room, he told me he was engaged to a woman he'd never met and that he was going to honour this commitment. I stayed in that motel room for three days expecting him to call back. He didn't. Instead, I created a miserable environment in which my heart could break in torturous silence. The only phone call I received was the one that made me go home; the one that turned the broken pieces of my heart into dust-like fragments. My mother had died of a brain tumour nobody knew was there.

Fourteen years ago, I founded the hair products company that would make me a millionaire. The company was named after my mother, Gloria Gill, and when an Australian multinational wanted to buy the rights to distribute in Australia and New Zealand, I moved to Sydney to oversee the process. It was too easy a decision to make, I'd been looking for an escape. I rented an overpriced waterfront apartment and fell in love with the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I worked tirelessly towards making my mother's name something that hairdressers everywhere could be proud of and I took it as a compliment when journalists misprinted my age as 33 in articles and interviews.

Twelve years ago, I received my first marriage proposal from an Australian entrepreneur famous for turning around the fortunes of failed businesses. At first he wanted to hire me. Then he wanted to dine me. And finally he wanted to marry me and love me for the rest of my life. He never seemed to want to fuck me and that was a problem. I didn't

want love; I wanted to be used. Not long after I turned him down, I realised how despicably rich I was. I began giving away over half of my income to brain tumour charities across the world and I downgraded to a suburban one-bedroom flat on a non-descript North Shore street. My only indulgence was a slightly skewed, distant view of the Harbour Bridge from the corner of the bedroom window.

Ten years ago, Gloria Gill was named 'Cosmetics Brand of the Year' in fourteen countries. At around the same time I found my first grey hair, a thick blade of white bursting out just above my right temple. It prompted me to sell my majority shareholding for more money than I was comfortable with and I put my apartment on the market. I met the woman who bought it privately at yoga. She had dark brown dreadlocks and a green Om symbol tattooed on the inside of her left wrist. As I handed over the keys, I asked her if she had a backpack and if I could buy it from her. I booked a one-way flight to Bangkok the next day.

Nine years ago, I was proposed to for the second time. He was a slight Japanese man of few words but many physical expressions. We met in India on a meditation retreat. He was there because of the stress of a divorce. I was there because it was finally time to deal with the loss of my mother. I returned to Tokyo with him and spent my days meditating on a designer sheepskin rug in front of a view of Shibuya. I teetered on the brink of falling in love with him, always pushed back by the fact that he had three young children I couldn't communicate with. I left in the middle of a rainy night because I knew saying goodbye might have pushed me over the edge.

Eight years ago, I arrived in Cape Town to roll out the same social enterprise I'd begun in Asia a year ago, International Start-up Support, ISS2. Using a similar model to the original ISS, I created an online network whereby successful professionals and business leaders could mentor small start-ups in developing countries. It was one of the first social enterprises of its kind. When I received an email from Amir saying he was divorced and wanted to see me again, I ignored it. I spent a lot of time on the beach listening to the waves and asking them for answers.

Seven years ago, I married Amir in a small ceremony on a beach in Barbados. Our only guests were a young Chinese couple on their honeymoon; they acted as witnesses, standing proudly next to us in matching swimwear. We moved into his Upper East Side Brownstone, which he paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to have refurbished. He called it our new start. I called it a waste of money.

Six years ago, Amir lost his job as a University professor. He blamed it on cutbacks and praised it as an opportunity to finish the book he'd been working on for seven years. I had to find out from the newspapers that it was because of a sexual harassment accusation, the third in two years. To this day, it disturbs me that they waited for unlucky number three.

Five years ago, my divorce from Amir was finalised and I moved to Indonesia to learn batik painting from a group of women who profited from sharing their art with tourists

thanks to ISS2. They acted drunk with gratitude in front of me and I met their children who welcomed me with wide smiles and shining eyes. There was something about those women and children that told me I wasn't at all responsible for their happiness. It came from somewhere else. Somewhere I'd not yet been.

Three years ago, I received a phone call and a new opportunity. It was the Australian entrepreneur whose marriage proposal I'd turned down. He was a contributor to a trust that supported a number of schools in the poorest parts of Southeast Asia. They'd found evidence of fraud and corruption on a number of regional education boards and the fund was floundering. Would I steer things in the right direction? He didn't have an office, an apartment or money to pay me. I landed in Kuala Lumpur less than a week later.

Two years ago, I decided to sell ISS and its international subsidiaries to an investment vehicle on the promise that all staff would remain in position for a minimum of five years. The money was obscene, but not as much as it should have been. I used a small fraction of it to buy and furnish an apartment in one of the many high-rises that pushed up from Kuala Lumpur's rolling hills. The rest went to the schools I was rebuilding. I spent my evenings with books again; a pile of books, imported French wine and Malaysia's muggy heat.

One year ago, I began to see real change in the schools I managed in Cambodia, Laos and rural Malaysia. I had to fire seventeen corrupt people, but each week I received a new letter of thanks from happy parents and pupils. For every

piece of paper I lay my hand on – treasuring a moment of reward – I took a second to think about the hundreds, thousands, millions that we weren't reaching. I realised this was where I belonged; in a job with no end. Once I resigned to this lonely but still satisfying fate, I relaxed into being a woman with some selfish pleasures again. I started having weekly massages and getting my hair coloured by a small Chinese lady who washed my hair not at the sink, but in a chair by the mirror. Using strips of my hair to pool the water and fold the shampoo in, she never once let a single drip run down my neck, though I always expected to walk away soaked. I would sit staring at her in the mirror as she stood on tiptoes to reach the top of my head with her bottle of water, all the time hoping that Mum was watching.

Five months ago, I met a man.

Four months ago, I started to sleep with him. It was both consuming and comfortable and I relished our lack of commitment. I hated his clothes, his flashy car and the gel he put in his hair, but I loved how he stroked my back to wake me up in the morning.

Six weeks ago, I missed my period and I was blinded by how lost in this world I was.

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