

SHY FEET

SHORT STORIES INSPIRED BY TRAVEL



FRANCES M THOMPSON

SHY FEET: SHORT STORIES INSPIRED BY TRAVEL

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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.

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