

THREE THINGS TO DO

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Sally took off the little white satin shoes with pointy toes, like something a Double O-Seven enemy would have worn to stab James Bond with. A deep red line at the base of her toes seemed to cut all the way through to her bones.

“Oh, your feet always swell when you get married and when you go on a long jet ride,” her mother-in-law had warned right before Sally walked down the aisle with York and a bridesmaid, of which there were two, well, really one and a half, Sally’s friend, a girl she’d worked with in the bank, checking people in and out of their safe deposit boxes, and York’s half sister. The girl from the bank had called York, “Yorkie”; he had those eyebrows, coarse, reddish hair, the square, sharp jaw, quick head motion; he hadn’t liked the appellation—York, twelve years older than Sally was fast losing or not bothering to fake that well known union-lubricant, a sense of humor. Having just done the one, getting married, tomorrow morning Sally was doing the other that would make her feet expand, the long jet ride. Twenty-six hours.

“I have to pack to be away three years in Java or was it Jordan?”—not Juneau, oh, she knew, though she should’ve written it down, but didn’t want York to wake up in the morning and find he’d married his Rolodex—three years, lot of clothes, “pack, pack, two, consummate—sounded like a soup—the marriage, three, digest the dry, white, indigestible wedding cake. Tonight,” she thought. “I’m not going to vomit on the plane. They’ll think it’s morning sickness, already, nosey stewardesses.” That they’d had to get married, even though nobody had to get married anymore. They hadn’t actually done it. How old fashioned was that? Well, sort of, you’d have to call it sex, in lieu of not having anything else to call it. His company had told him, Get married. The company doesn’t promote single men. He had, he said, run a parade of likely candidates—victims?—before his bosses. But he had chosen her, he said. As soon as he saw her. He said.

York had gone into the bathroom. They were staying, not in a bridal suite, a regular room at the old, unrefurbished St. Regis hotel. The black and white tile bathroom with its ancient fixtures and rumbling pipes reassured her she could deal with the cake and the consummation. Well, devoutly to be wished. What was sex anymore? Like money, essentially meaningless. You longed for it, pined and died, and then when you got it, it was nothing, like salt that had lost its savor. It became nothing faster than nothing because of the time you'd spent wishing for it. Like money. Like choosing your china pattern, your silver. Setting the table for a dinner party.

Her new mother-in-law had already told her, 'No, no, Dear, one never says dinner-party, that would imply you were doing something out of the ordinary. Just dinner.' Food on the left, drink to the right. Monograms. Your maiden name over there, to the right, his surname in the middle.

The packing was something else. What did one take, wear? in J.? Was it hot, cold? Both? She had read books. They said, keep a sweater handy. Veils. Air conditioning?

You didn't show the bottom of your feet. You didn't shake hands with which hand? One was your toilet hand. Your finger, the wrong finger, could provoke an incident. York's company would be kicked out. The state department, the United Nations, CNN would have to address the issue, all over her pinkie. She had heard stories. She had looked on the map.

"Couldn't we just stay in New York a few days after the wedding?" she had begged. "Get used to the idea, to each other, before the idea becomes, what do they call it? Reality? Before we become, what? A marriage? A couple?" "No, we have to go. Right away," he said, "They're expecting me. They're expecting you."

Her mother had walked down the aisle—the seating of the mothers, imagine printing such a motion, pregnant. Pregonent! Between the time Sally had gotten engaged, her mother, age forty six and a half, was sticking out like the cow catcher on a locomotive. A maternity dress announced to the world sex and fertility and lack of precaution and what-were-you-or-what-weren't-you-thinking still reigned. At least in her family. What was the difference, York had asked her, even before he met her family, between genius and stupidity? "Genius has its limits." He

had been so pleased with himself. And then, during the months of her mother's beginning to show he had been less pleased with himself. And her. What kind of family would do something like that. Everybody knew what made babies, didn't they? By now? Empty nest syndrome? but this was carrying it too far.

The booklets and books and brochures and letters from York's working friends who already lived there—J—she had even met one or two who had come back to the States to live, or get well, or have a baby, or just take a break—the 'literature,' as they called it, would've explained, explained everything, maybe even to her mother, but Sally hadn't had time to read all of it. She thought he hadn't bothered to read all about her, to know her, either. Books. Books contradicted each other. If you were reading up about weddings and choosing bouquets and bridesmaid's dresses, and silver and china patterns and wondering whether they would survive the journey to the Far East you didn't have time to study the culture of aborigine headhunters. "Oh, you'll love it!" one of York's business associates had told her. "Nothing to do." He had meant servants. Plenty of 'suvants,' he pronounced it, plenty of entertainments. The man said he wasn't going back, though. Ever. Shops. Silk. Jewelry. Sandalwood. Panther toques. One had to be careful about drinking in tropical climates, though, the man said. Can deplete you. Make you hot. So did suntans. And their culture didn't approve of women exposing their bodies. The beaches were for drying clothes. Oil was for cooking, not rubbing on the thighs. One man had shown her a microscope in his apartment—most of her dates had shown her CD's and floppy disks, usually in their bedrooms—but this man, a friend of York's and the same age—had daubed alcohol (vodka) on a philodendron leaf and placed it on a slide and let her look. The little cell walls, shaped like dill pickles, were drawing in on their centers. "That's why you're thirsty the next morning." She stopped him before he put the leaf under an ultraviolet lamp in the bathroom.

York came out of the bathroom. Who was Saint Regis? Cathy Lee's partner? She was certainly no saint. He was wearing new pajamas. The creases where they'd been folded gave his body another shape than the one she remembered seeing him topless on a sailboat and the night they did whatever they'd done, that she could scarcely remember it, described it. He had no expression in his eyes, might have been Little

Orphan Annie. He was task oriented. His face said task now. I need to remember this, she thought. She wondered though whether she had packed enough brassieres. That wouldn't be something you could buy in J., they said. Or condoms. Against the law. Religion. York's friend had shown them slides of the place and inhabitants, women in loose-fitting, shapeless dresses and veils and head dresses none of it distinctive, more like sheets or dishrags pressed into service against the heat and men's lust. Nineteen-sixty five, these pictures, a little behind the times, now. I guess I can pack later, she thought as York approached the bed.

She had put on—bought for the occasion—a shorty nightie with a matching peignoir that did not scream bridal night. She had thought a long time about what to buy. This had no lace on it. He took off his pajama top. She could tell he'd been doing push-ups in the bathroom. He was breathing slightly more than he should've been in the fore—foreplay—and his pectoral muscles seemed almost to speak male breast envy. York had some hair on his chest, thin, soft hair, barely a pattern, a few stray hairs across the upper reaches, a narrow arrow of pale hairs pointing to the object in question. Staring at him, her mind still on her suitcases, she reflected he wasn't unattractive. He looked at her a minute. The room was chilly. They had already called the desk. He put his pajama jacket back on, seeming to shiver a little at both the temperature and the gesture. Did they want to have a baby? Right now? Like her mother? They should talk about that. But when? Now seemed inappropriate. He wanted an heir, had actually used that word, he had a rich old maid aunt. They would name the child, if a girl, after the aunt, and if a boy, after the aunt's father. A portrait of the father hung over the mantel in the drafty old house the woman lived in in Louisiana. The aunt's father had made millions hauling guano from caves in South America up the coast to process and sell to farmers after the Civil War and cotton had depleted the farm land.

The next morning, so the night had gone, not anything particular to remark, she thought, and maybe he did, too, but good enough, she had gotten up at four thirty and begun re-packing suitcases. She had gone into the bathroom, laid the grips out on top of the tub—there was a rack for sponges? and things, and the toilet and commenced. At first she tried to fold things carefully, stuff tissue paper and then toilet paper into the sleeves of her blouses, afternoon dresses—what time was

afternoon over there? Did they even have afternoons? And then, finally, she gave up. Nothing can survive a twenty-six hour flight, she thought, cramming her dresses—they don't wear pants, the women, except the natives, sort of Ghandi leggings, but you're not supposed to wear those, white women, she was told. White women. Pink women. Lilac women. She thought of her wedding dress. A confection her sister was supposed to deal with after her departure for J. 'Oh, yes, if you don't have it cleaned instantly,' a friend of York's mother had told her, 'it'll yellow. They can't ever get it white again.. You don't want your grand daughter going down the aisle in a yellow dress, do you?' It hadn't seemed such a bad idea. Yellow was flattering to blonds. She wanted to have a blond daughter. Sally dyed her hair. And her eyebrows. Did York notice? He had turned off the light last night and looked away.

Sally saw day outside the bathroom window, daylight down a dark shaft, New York City where the city plan was to shut out the sun, no matter how high they had to build. You couldn't fight numbers. Hours. Floors. The plane wouldn't wait. Time wouldn't.

There was a small breakfast downstairs for them, just family. She hoped there wouldn't be jokes. Close friends. She wondered a moment, the distinction. Family, close friends. Somebody's feelings would be hurt. 'If she's a close friend I'm a monkey's uncle,' somebody who hadn't been invited. There would be monkeys there. She'd seen pictures. In J. They came into your house. Our closest living relatives, speaking of close friends, and they were so unappealing, so unsexy. She'd as soon have sex with a Lhasa Apso or an African gray parrot, a pony. Monkeys. Her family had always pronounced, 'donkeys,' to rhyme with.

"About ready?" York asked. He was. Always. For any eventuality. Dressed. His pink, just shaved cheeks attested the closeness of cleanliness to Godliness. God would like his face. A terrier, she'd thought a moment before. Now a white porcelain bowl. A lifetime awaited her. Before that, an around-the-clock jet ride. Oh, if they could only stay a few days. Just them. Take the pressure off. Hold each other in bed, just hold, not do anything else. "No," he said. "We have to go."

They had a coffee cake in the shape of the country, J. The one and a half bridesmaids were turned out in native costumes. Other guests in the hotel coffee shop lounge stared at them. Sally had always hated being the person other people stared at. 'Their party,' as a waiter might

say—seemed too happy about the cake. Her mouth still tasted the dry white one of the night before. Why had she chosen these shoes? They already hurt. They matched the coffee colored going away suit she'd bought—coffee, 'Such a good color for breakfast if you spill something,' the salesgirl had laughed—Sally had told her about the wedding, the trip. The girl had seemed to think marriage was about as funny as the comment about the coffee spill. How many more hours, Sally thought. Then she'd have to face him, face his company. Face J.

And of course, Sally's mother was there, looking vaguely pretty, though helpless, a living victim of what men did to women in the dark and women had to endure for the mere sake of survival of the species. Sally thought, surely Mendel and Darwin and DNA would've come up with something a little less onerous for the female of the breed by now. Somebody, at the bridal shower where they'd played inane games, had said the human brain was getting so big ordinary females wouldn't be able to deliver much longer. Why don't they ever use it, Sally wondered. Her child, should she force a Buick through her birth canal, would have an aunt its age already, oh, her mother had already found out the gender. Sally could imagine the children joking about that, wondering. She'd heard her parents, years ago, talking about a friend of theirs being caught in a scandal. Sally and her friends had been astonished people that age, forty-something, still did it. Now, her husband was close enough to that age, and he spoke—he was Southern—about 'eventualities,'—children, he'd explained,—using the word, 'heir,' again. She imagined, like what she'd just been through with her mother and her new husband, that her baby might emerge black or Seminole, some secret her family genes—she didn't have a rich aunt—had hidden for centuries only to be exposed in her offspring. She saw Gregor Mendel's smooth and wrinkled peas, the fruit flies, white rats. Thought of them rattling around in her uterus, being shaken out by some less than sympathetic OBGYN in J. where the women dropped their young in the rice paddies and went on harvesting or shucking or whatever they did to feed the nation.

York started looking at his watch. 'When does a gentleman look at his watch?' 'Never,' York had told her—Southern, again—things like that—'her mother was a Miss So-and So.' 'One never has soup with lunch.' She'd had soup for lunch all her life. Was glad to have soup. For breakfast if she felt like it. 'Now Daddy has something to tell you, listen

carefully,' York would say to his heir. 'One never, that's never has soup for lunch.'

Weren't you supposed to have these reservations about marriage, about the groom, the color and size of your baby, before the wedding, before you put on the tight shoes and squeezed on the ring—he hadn't chosen to wear one: 'men don't, in our family,' 'no soup,' and got into the pressurized plane?

They were outside, one of those numbered streets; a cab had been called, in advance, was waiting. Her mother had said, 'surely a limousine. They're a dime a dozen in New York City.' But who paid any attention to pregnant forty-six year olds. And more luxurious transportation modes had changed the night Sally'd said yes to York. Instead of going home in a taxi even from the restaurant where York had proposed, they were riding the subway. Or, walking. 'It's only twenty-two blocks, do your legs good,' York had said. She had tried to be gay—'Wonderful Town,' do an odd little pirouette after dinner and too much wine (he'd said) as she approached the turn style. "Careful," he'd told her, closing down any attempt at gaiety, "if you push it and don't go through it's another token. No use wasting good money." Wasn't a man supposed to compensate for being older by being looser with his wallet? A rule like not having vichysoisse for lunch. Why were all the rules, Sally wondered, of his making, none of hers?

Some of the wedding party wanted to come with them. To the airport. No, no, no, he said, his famous triple no. It could rise at the end, or being high already, descend. But the no meant no. He had the kind of face one didn't argue with, not because one couldn't imagine winning, but because it was pointless. "You never win an argument, a case," his dead father, a lawyer York often quoted, had said. "You make them so mad they get back at you. You never win a war. You have to go over there and rebuild the whole damn place, and they outsmart you and out sell you and out market you every time, because, after all, they don't have any capital outlays. Everything that goes into the equation comes from you. You should've seen England after the war, bombed out, depleted, empty, an egg a week. Germany was already sky scrapers, Mercedes Benzes, hi-fi systems, clocks that kept time. Our women—occupying forces in Japan—were studying *ikebana*, paying."

In the departing cab York waved once to the cheering group—how

many were there? Ten? Twelve? She wanted to take his hand, but she didn't, and something told her that was the right thing, not to do. She rolled down the window—it didn't work very well—the metal crank rubbed against the glass—and stuck out her head, waving, trying to hold on to her hat—"Oh, they insist women wear hats over there. It'll keep your hair intact besides," a female returnee told her. York drew her back into the car. She suddenly or slowly felt she was in prison, albeit a minimum security prison. When he put his hand on hers one of his rare reconsiderations, she imagined, it felt cold but right, like a toilet seat in winter on your bottom. "It's not so bad," he said. And stared at the meter. She looked at the driver's permit. He was from J. She thought she could detect a faint odor, something between cumin and fermented yak milk, not that she'd ever smelled that. "You can sleep on the plane," York said. "I'll give you a sedative. I've got a whole bottle. A year's supply. You can't get any over there." Had she told him, surely he knew, had he forgotten, her mother's husband wasn't her father? Did they have epidurals in J.? Her feet were killing her. Did they even have Dr. Scholl's?