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DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

I imagine that couples often forget they're married; I know that a person who is single remembers it every day, like a broken promise, that dwindling inheritance he is neglecting to spend. The married ones remind him of his condition – children do, too. He feels called upon to apologize or explain. He resists saying that he has made a choice. Where is his act? Bachelorhood looks like selfish delay, and the words are loaded: bachelor means queer, spinster means hag.

The hotel elevator stopped at every floor, filling with witnesses who brought me back to myself, to Jill's note. She was planning to stop in Ayer Hitam on her way to Djakarta – would I mind if she stayed a few days? She had specified the dates, her time of arrival, the telephone number and contact address in Kuala Lumpur where she could be reached. The flat belonged to her friend who was, like Jill, a secretary: the Embassy's sorority sisters. She told me how many suitcases she had. She was methodical, decisive; she had typed the note neatly. Several weeks later she sent a postcard repeating the information. She wasn't pestering. It was secretarial work.

And the only indication I had of her present state of mind was the form in which she sent the messages. The letter came in a 'Peanuts' envelope – a cartoon of Snoopy on the flap; her neatly typed note was from a joke note-pad titled Dumb Things I Gotta Do. The postcard was of a square-rigger and she had mailed it from Miami. I guessed that she had taken the windjammer cruise advertised on the front.

We had met in Kampala during my first overseas tour. As she was the Ambassador's secretary and I was a junior political officer she knew a great deal more than I did about the running of the Embassy. She showed me how to work the shredder, she alerted me to important cables. The fact that I was seeing her caused a certain amount of talk, embassy gossip, more class snobbery than a concern for security. The way she reacted to it made me like her the more: she never referred to her boss except by calling him 'the Ambassador,' she was discreet, she did not betray the smallest confidence. It was as if she had taken vows, and though celibacy was not one of them, secrecy was. She was so tactful about other people, I knew she would be tactful when my name came up. On the weekends we went to the loud dirty African night-clubs and danced to Congolese bands. I had made love to her on nine occasions – I kept count as if preparing a defense for myself, because I was sure we were watched. Eight of the occasions were after these dances; the ninth was the night before she left the country on transfer – I remember her suitcase in the living room and the stack of tea-chests awaiting the embassy packers. I was left with the sense that we had been deliberately separated.

She was sent to Vietnam, a promotion of sorts since her salary was practically doubled with hardship pay. There she stayed, in Saigon, while I finished in Kampala and was reassigned to Ayer Hitam. At first she had written to me often; the letters became fewer, and finally they stopped altogether. I thought I had heard the last of her, then the 'Peanuts' envelope came, and the windjammer postcard, the news that she was being sent to Djakarta. Knowing that I was going to meet her again I felt a thrill and a slight ache, the mingled sense of freedom and obligation at seeing a former lover.

Ayer Hitam was a considerable detour for her. I was flattered by her willingness to put up with the inconvenience. I looked forward to her visit. But I did not answer her letter immediately. Instead, I tried to recall in as much detail as possible the times we had spent together, and almost unexpectedly I discovered the memories to be tender. We had been alone, private, complete, for the short time we'd known each other, and she had shown me by example how to manage such affairs.

But the mind is thorough: seeking the past it casts us images of the future. I saw Jill in Ayer Hitam being joshed at the Club by Alec and leered at by Squibb and hearing how Strang grew watercress in his gumboots. At City Bar and at the mission she would look for more and see nothing more. In the town and at my house, trying to praise, she would miss what it took a year of residence to see, as if your eyes had to become accustomed to the strong light to perceive that the place had features, that the club members' ghastly jollity was a defense against strangers, that the weather was not as harsh in November as it was in June, or the aspect of the town – its dust and junk – as unimportant as it seemed. I would not be able to prove that events had taken place in Ayer Hitam; where was the proof? The past in the tropics is just the green erasures of wild plants. Jill was a kind person, but even her kindness would not prevent her, on a short visit to the town, from seeing the place as a backwater.

I wrote saying that I would be in Singapore on the dates she mentioned. Perhaps we could meet there? The letter went to her contact address in KL. She phoned me when she arrived in the capital, said she understood and that Singapore was perfect. She was planning to fly from there to Djakarta to start her new job.

'What about Raffles Hotel – romantic!'

'It's not what it was,' I said. 'I generally stay at one of the plastic ones, the Mandarin.'

'You're the mandarin,' she said. 'I'll see you there, Thursday at three.'

'Will I recognize you?'

She laughed. 'Probably not. I'll be the fat blonde in the lobby.'

Everyone in the elevator was staring at the lighted numbers. For part of the descent I was giving myself reasons why I should not sleep with Jill; for the rest, reasons why I should make an attempt; and then we were at the lobby. She had not been fat before, and her hair had been dark, but she was partly right – she had put on a few pounds and her hair was now streaked gray-blonde. She looked, when I saw her sitting by the fountain, like a woman waiting for her lover – not me, someone older, richer, whom she would describe as a snappy dresser, a riot, a real card. She was sensible enough to know that she looked her best in a light suit, with make-up. She was of the denim and T-shirt generation, but in matters of dress State Department employees are twenty years behind the times. She had obviously just had her hair done, she wore beautiful shoes, and her jewelry – four bracelets on each wrist, a necklace, a brooch – gave her the appearance of being bigger than she was, and slightly vulgar. Jewelry represents in its glitter a kind of smug self-esteem, cold and protective, like queenly armor. She looked safe and unassailable wearing her jewels.

She saw me and sat forward to let me kiss her, and she lingered a fraction as if posing a question with that pressure. Perfume – a familiar scent, but much more of it, so much that it clung to my mouth, and each time she moved she created drafts of it against my eyes.

We did not speak until we were in the bar and touching glasses. She said, ‘You haven’t changed. I know I have – let’s not mention it here. I’m out of my element. How do you manage to keep so thin?’

‘Dysentery. I’ve got the worst cook in Malaysia.’

‘Be glad you don’t have me – I can’t cook to save my life! Hey, the gal I was staying with in KL said you’ve got just the prettiest little Consulate. And you must like it because she says you never set foot out of it.’

‘I do, but I don’t tell anyone.’

‘I forgot you were so young!’ I saw in her smile and that wink – as obvious as a shade being drawn – pure lust. She was counting on me.

She said, ‘Did I tell you I was robbed?’

‘You didn’t mention it, no.’

‘I thought I told you on the phone. I’ve told everyone else. It was at that gal’s flat when I arrived. My bags were on the landing. She let me in and when I went out for my bags the small case was gone. It couldn’t have been there more than two minutes. They think a child did it. They’ve had other incidents. Of course, they haven’t found it.’

She did not look in the least distressed. She had lost her bag but now she had a good story.

‘Was there anything valuable in it?’

‘My watch. One I had made in Bangkok when I was getting Saigon out of my system. It’s not the money – it was specially made for me. Sentimental value.’

‘If it was custom-made it must have been worth something.’

She faced me. ‘It cost two thousand dollars. It had a jade face, diamond chips, and a gold strap. That was two years ago. It’s probably worth more now. But it’s not the money.’

‘I’d be in mourning if I were you.’

‘You’re lying,’ she said. Her tone was affectionate. ‘But thanks – it’s a nice lie.’

I said, ‘Maybe they’ll find the thief.’

‘I can always buy another one. But it won’t be the same.’

‘A watch,’ I said. ‘Worth two grand.’

‘More like three. But friends are much more important than things like that.’ She met my gaze. ‘Don’t you think so?’

I wanted to say no. I felt slightly blackmailed by the sentiments her loss required of me. But I said, ‘Sure I do.’

‘I was looking forward to seeing you.’

This all came so neatly that I suspected a trick; she had baited the trap with something pathetic to arouse my sympathy and make me pause. Then she’d pounce. And yet I felt a futile indebtedness. We had been lovers – we were no longer. There was no way I could repay her except by a show of that same love, and that was gone. I did not feel the smallest tug of lust, only a foolish reflex, as if I’d seen two youngsters kissing and had to turn away to spare them embarrassment, to save myself from judging them.

I said, ‘I’ve thought about you a lot. Those terrible nightclubs. What a dreadful place Uganda was. But I didn’t notice. You had such a cozy apartment.’

‘You should have seen it with the lights on. A mess. But I had a nice one in Saigon. It was in the compound – they all were – but on the top floor, air-conditioned, a guest

room. I bought one of those waterbeds. They're fun, even if you're alone.'

'Waterbeds in Saigon,' I said. 'No wonder we lost the war.'

She winced, and all her make-up exaggerated this pained face as it had exaggerated her smiling one. She said, 'I hated to leave. Sometimes I think of the others, the local staff, those telex operators and code clerks we left behind, and I want to weep. You never came to Vietnam.'

'I was offered a trip, a fact-finding tour. I knew the facts, so I refused.'

'You could have seen me. I'd have shown you around. I was hoping you'd visit. When you didn't I knew you'd thought about it and decided not to – you'd made a choice.'

I wondered if she was being gentle with me by describing this missed opportunity: if I had gone, if she had shown me around, if I had made a gesture then, things would be different now.

I said, 'Maybe we'll both be posted to Hanoi when we open our embassy there. It won't be long.'

Jill said, 'They shoot dogs in Hanoi. They won't shoot my Alfie.'

'You have a dog?'

'Upstairs. Wouldn't travel without him. A cocker spaniel.'

'You didn't have a dog in Kampala.'

'I inherited him in Saigon,' she said. 'He changed my life. I took him back to the States after the pull-out. I'm taking him to Djakarta.'

'He's a well-traveled dog.'

'You'd better believe it. In the States we crossed the country. We went all the way to Arizona together.'

'I thought you were from Ohio.'

'I bought some land in Arizona.' She saw my interest and added, 'Twenty acres.'

This, like the expensive watch, baffled me. She had told me once how after her father had died she'd gone to secretarial school in Cleveland, because it was cheaper than college. She had worked for three years supporting her mother: the single person

always has a significant parent, inevitably a burden. But her mother had died, and Jill had joined the Foreign Service, to leave Ohio.

She said, ‘It’s outside Tucson – it’s good land. When I left Saigon I had so much money! We had all that hardship pay, those bonuses – everyone made money in Vietnam except the GIs. I thought I’d invest it, so we looked around, Alfie and me, and we settled on Arizona. It’s sunny, it’s clean, I can go there when I retire. I’ll sell the land off in lots. Actually, I was thinking I’d sell half and use the money to build some houses on the rest, then sell those houses and buy myself a really nice one.’

It was an ingenious scheme, and at once it all fitted together, the watch, the dog, the vacations, the jewelry, the land. She had made a choice. Once, perhaps, she had needed me; no longer. I could not be her life – this was her life. And seeing how she was managing – that however much she might have needed me she had never counted on me – I felt tender towards her and slightly saddened by the complicated arrangements that are necessary when we can’t depend on each other. What precautions had I taken?

This security of hers was, if not an aphrodisiac, an encouragement. I had had two drinks, but seeing how safe and contented she was made me happy. She was managing; she wouldn’t make demands. She was like that fabulous mistress, the older woman, either divorced or happily married who, with free afternoons, finds a man she likes and sleeps with him because she is energetic and resourceful and likes his dark eyes and believes that as long as she is happy she is blameless.

Land in Arizona: it reassured me.

I said, ‘How do you like this hotel?’

‘The drinks are too expensive down here,’ she said. ‘I’ve got a bottle in my room. Shall we economize?’

‘Whatever you say.’

‘It’s time I fed Alfie. He’s probably tearing the room apart.’

Her room was on the fifteenth floor, and from the window I could see the sprawling island, the tiny red-roofed houses and the high-rise horrors. The hotel in the underdeveloped country is like a view from a plane. You are passing overhead and you know that if those people down there had this view they would overthrow their government.

I looked out the window so as to avoid staring at the room. The dog had been sleeping on the unmade bed, and as we entered he had woken and bounded toward us,

whimpering at Jill, barking at me.

‘You’re all excited, aren’t you? Yes, you are!’ Jill was scratching him affectionately. ‘He’s very possessive. Look at him.’

The dog was shaking with excitement and rage. I thought he might sink his teeth into me.

Jill said, ‘That’s pure jealousy.’

There were shoes on the bed. One dress lay over the back of a chair, another over a door to the closet. Three suitcases were open on the floor and it looked as if the dog had pulled the clothes out. Jill’s short-wave radio was on the bedside table with a copy of Arizona Highways and a Doris Lessing paperback.

She saw me looking at the novel and said, ‘Airplane reading. I picked it up in London. That gal has problems.’

‘Don’t most gals?’

She looked hurt. ‘Don’t most people?’

She had seemed so cool in the bar. Up here, in this cluttered room, it was as if I was seeing the contents of her mind, all of it shaken out. And I had known the moment I saw the dog that I couldn’t do anything here – certainly not make love. There was no room for me; she could not have all this and a lover – she had made her choice.

‘Is your room like this?’ she asked.

I nodded. One suitcase, my pipe, my drip-dry suit. The opposite of this, and yet I envied her the completeness of her mess and saw in it a recklessness I could never manage.

‘I love these little refrigerators. They must be Japanese.’ She walked towards the squat thing and the rubber around the door made a sucking noise as she pulled it open. ‘Same again? Here’s the tonic, here’s the ice, and here’s the anesthetic.’ She had brought an enormous bottle of gin from the bathroom. ‘This was supposed to be your present for letting me stay at your house. Five bucks at the duty-free shop in Bangkok.’

‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘This is fine, a real reunion – I’m out of my element.’ She made herself a drink and crawled on to the bed. I noticed she was still wearing her shoes.

She sat with her legs crossed, stroking the dog. She had moved through the clutter without seeing it; this disorder was her order.

I touched her glass. ‘To your new job.’

‘Same job, new place,’ she said. ‘And here’s to your new place.’

‘I’m leaving Ayer Hitam in two months,’ I said.

‘That’s what I mean.’

‘So you knew.’

She said, ‘I saw a cable.’

‘Where am I going?’

She said, ‘I forget.’

Was this why she had come? Because no matter what happened it wouldn’t last; we would be parted, as we had been in Kampala. She had known she was leaving there – how wrong I had been to think I was the cause of her transfer to Saigon. That was her element, diplomatic relations, the continual parting. She was stronger than I had guessed.

I said, ‘Well, it’s not Djakarta.’

‘No.’

‘It’s far.’

‘They told you.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘You did.’

She laughed. ‘If I knew you,’ she said, ‘I think I’d really like you a lot.’

‘Maybe you should have come to Ayer Hitam.’

‘I’m glad I didn’t,’ she said. ‘What if I had liked it? It might be nice – flowers, trees, friendly people. I guessed you had one of those big shady houses, very cool, with gleaming floors and everything put away and a little Chinese man making us drinks.’

I said nothing: it was as she had described it.

‘Then I wouldn’t have wanted to go. I’d have been sad, crying all the way to Djakarta. You’ve never seen me cry. I’m scary.’

‘You’re not sad now.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘This is the place for us. A hotel room. Our own bottle of gin. Glasses from the bathroom. Couldn’t be better.’

I must have agreed rather half-heartedly – I was still thinking of her calculation in seeking me out just before I was to be transferred – because the next thing I heard her say was, ‘I suppose I should be sightseeing. Sniffing around. Every country has its own cigarette smell. Funny, isn’t it? You know where you are when someone lights up.’

I said, ‘I could take you sightseeing. There’s only the Tiger Balm Gardens, a few noodle stalls, and the harbor.’

‘I’d hate you to do that,’ she said. ‘Anyway, this is a business trip for you. I don’t want to be in your way.’ She winked as she had before. ‘Diplomatic relations.’

As I raised my glass to her the dog growled.

‘You don’t think it’s tacky, retiring to Arizona?’

‘You’re not retiring yet.’

‘So you do think it’s tacky. But you’re right – there’ll be lots of assignments between now and then.’

‘Hanoi.’

She said, ‘I’ll hide Alfie in the pouch. I’ll be your secretary. I’m out of my element here, but I’m a damned good secretary.’

‘Perfect.’

She said, ‘It’s a date. Can I freshen your drink?’

How appropriate those phrases were to her fifties chic, the girdle, the beautiful shoes, the lipstick, the jewels.

‘Business,’ I said, and put my empty glass down out of her reach. ‘I have an appointment. You understand.’

She did: I had reminded her that she was a secretary. She said, ‘Maybe I’ll see you at breakfast.’

‘I’ll be on the road before seven.’

‘Whatever you do, don’t call me at seven!’ She smiled and said, ‘Hanoi, then.’

She knew she was absurd and insincere; she had no idea how brave I thought she was. She stood between me and the barking dog and let me kiss her cheek.

‘Diplomatic relations,’ she said. ‘Off you go.’

I went to my room and drew the curtains, cutting off the aching late-afternoon sun. I lay on my bed and tried to sleep, but it was no good. I felt I had revealed more to Jill in my reticence than if I had been stark naked and drunk. This thought was like a bump in the mattress. I did not wait for morning. That night I checked out of the hotel, roused Abubaker and went home. And now I knew why I hadn’t let her visit Ayer Hitam: I didn’t want her to pity me.