

Hanoi Jane

Elka Ray

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For Thien, who makes everything more fun..

1 FLAT EARTH

It's my lunch break and I'm standing outside of my office at the *Hanoi Scope*, staring at a crumpled *To Do* list. Item number three, below *Pay phone bill* and *Buy roach spray*, is *Pick up wedding dress*. I haven't gotten around to the first two but am in the right part of town to fulfill number three. The tailor is only two blocks away. I start walking.

Normally, I'd have driven, but my apple-green 1964 Vespa scooter had failed to start this morning. I'd chosen the bike (against my fiance Wyatt's advice) for its paintjob rather than its mechanical integrity — a decision that, in 36-degree heat, I'm regretting. I yell for a motorbike-taxi but get no takers. The only driver in sight is stretched out on his bike's seat with his bare feet on the handlebars, napping.

At the best of times, Hanoi is a bad place to walk, its streets seething with vehicles and its sidewalks broken, uneven and full of parked motorbikes. Now, in mid-July, the city is like a sauna, albeit one scented with exhaust fumes and bad drains rather than cedar and eucalyptus oil. Resigned, I plod along Trang Tien Street, trying to stick to the thin strips of shade cast by overhanging snarls of electrical wires. Sweat

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drips into my eyes and trickles down my back. Even my kneecaps are sweating.

I'm about half a block from the tailor's when my phone rings. It's my friend Sigrid, asking whether Wyatt and I want tickets to watch some visiting Bangladeshi dance troupe this Saturday night. Sigrid is always attending cultural events, the more obscure, the better. I tell her that we have other plans, which is a lie. I doubt that my banker fiancé would enjoy Bangladeshi folk dance. I consider calling him, just to be sure that he hasn't already made other, solo plans for Saturday night and forgotten to tell me, but decide not to disturb him.

"Too bad for you. I hear their costumes are fantastic," says Sigrid breezily. "There's a Polish theater troupe the following weekend. I'll let you know if I can get tickets to that one." I remind her that we'll be back in North Carolina for our wedding and she says, "What? You're getting married? Oh wow, how could I have forgotten?"

"Are you mocking me?" I say, because I know that she is. I try not to talk about my wedding non-stop but it's about the only thing that I can think about.

Sigrid laughs. "Only a little," she says. "You're not as bad as some brides I've known. I'm still waiting for you to throw a fit because the icing on the cake is the wrong shade of pink or something."

"There's still time," I say. For a second, I consider asking Sigrid to meet me at the tailor's. Trying on my wedding dress feels like a big deal and it'd be nice to have a friend there. The way I'd always pictured the final fitting, my mom and bridesmaids would be on hand to *ooh* and *aw* and fuss with my tiara. I'd also like a second opinion and Sigrid is honest to a fault. But I hesitate and Sigrid tells me that she's late for a meeting.

"Stop stressing about your wedding," she says, before she hangs up. "It's meant to be fun, not an ordeal, remember?"

I stuff my cell phone back into my bag. That's easy for Sigrid to say. She's not about to get married in front of 250 people halfway around the world. Organizing a wedding

long-distance has been hell, since I've had no choice but to depend on my mom, Tabitha, which is like asking a peacock to organize a party for a pigeon. My mom can't accept that this isn't *her* big day and seems determined to rectify that.

Turning onto Church Street, I stop in the shade of St. Joseph's Cathedral and dab my face with a tissue. Even the beggars and postcard vendors are resting, while the cops who usually sit outside of the police station spitting and smoking are probably holed up in some air-conditioned karaoke lounge. I dig another tissue from my bag and mop the back of my neck. At least the tailor shop will have air-conditioning.

The bells of St. Joseph's chime once, a reminder that I'd better get a move on. At 2:30 I'm supposed to interview some French guy who's skateboarding across Asia, then check out a new Indian restaurant at 3:45. This long before the *Hanoi Scope* goes to print, I'd normally have lots of free time, but since I'm about to take six weeks off of work, I have a slew of stories to write. I step into the tailor shop, grateful for a blast of cool air. I figure that I can drop my wedding dress off at home before meeting that crazy French skateboarder.

Seeing me, the tailor smiles. "It's ready," she says, then ushers me into the sole changing cubicle. I peel off my shirt and use it to swipe the sweat from my back, then turn to survey my plastic-wrapped wedding dress.

The tailor, a tiny, cheery woman named Huong, is a genius. Bias-cut from silk overlaid with cream lace, the dress makes me look taller, slimmer and much more elegant than I really am. The hand-beaded bodice has just the right amount of sparkle. I am so grateful that I'm speechless.

"You lose weight," says Huong approvingly, when I bounce out of the cubicle. I want to kiss her.

Back out on the street, now clutching a pink plastic garment bag, I feel dizzy with happiness. Trying on the dress has made my wedding day seem even closer. In less than a month I'll be married! If it weren't so hot I'd do a little dance

on the sidewalk. I want to call all of my girlfriends and gush about how well my dress fits. Instead, I scan the street for motorbike-taxis. It's too hot to hang around outdoors. I need a long, cold shower.

The only *xe om* driver around is an old guy in dark glasses and a pith helmet. After setting a price that's too high he spits loudly into the gutter, my attempts at bargaining met with further expectorations. Since I'm short on time and no regular taxis are around, I clamber aboard his Chinese scooter. Following a final discharge of phlegm, we start moving.

Through the Old Quarter, where there's little room to maneuver, my *xe om* drives sedately. But as soon as we hit the dyke road he accelerates, the bike weaving wildly between slower traffic. I hug my flapping garment bag and wish that I'd called a proper taxi. How tragic would it be to die just weeks before my wedding?

"Slower," I yell, one of five Vietnamese words that I've learned, the others being *Khong* and *Toi la nguoi My*, which translate as 'No' and 'I am American'. Unfortunately for me, Vietnamese is a tonal language. A single syllable can have six different meanings depending on the inflection. Since I can't differentiate the various tones, let alone reproduce them, only other similarly tone-deaf foreigners can understand me. "Cham cham!" I yell again, then, attempting another tone: "Cha-am cha-am!"

The driver turns to gape at me. "Eh?" he says, his mouth like a black and white photo of London during the Blitz. "Noi gi?" His lack of comprehension needs no translating.

Hit by the sour scent of alcohol fumes, I lean back. "Look where you're going!" I yell in English, gesturing straight ahead of us. I glance up at the sky. It has started to drizzle.

The driver takes one hand off the bike's handlebars and waves it around in a gesture of incomprehension. Turning off of the dyke road, we come perilously close to hitting a three-wheeled cart full of flowerpots. I resolve to keep quiet.

I'm gripping the bike's luggage rack so tightly that my fingers hurt. The motorbike hits a bump. I shut my eyes and hang on grimly.

Five harrowing minutes later the *xe om* pulls to a stop in front of the row-house that I share with Wyatt. When I scramble off, my knees are shaking. After paying the *xe om* driver I sift through my bag for my keys, the drizzle now turned to rain. My bag's so full of stuff — work notebooks, spare shirt, laptop, cell phone, sunglasses, three tubes of lip gloss, a water bottle, a bag of gummy bears, a fork for takeaway lunches, wadded up tissues — that I'm soaked by the time I find them.

Like most houses in Hanoi, ours is tall and skinny, the layout on each of the four floors identical with a big front room, a bathroom, a central stairwell, and a small back room. Wyatt rented this house before I arrived in Hanoi, since I stayed on in Raleigh for an extra month to finalize our wedding details. We're getting married in the same chapel where my parents wed. Just thinking about it makes me shiver. Ever since I was a little girl I've imagined myself walking down that aisle and now it's finally happening.

A retractable metal gate covers our front door, which is wide enough to drive a car through. Before reaching through the bars to unlock the two padlocks, I gaze up at the house. When I first saw it I'd been dismayed, since it looks like a rent-by-the-hour love hotel and I'd imagined us living in some quaint, French-style villa. Wyatt chose this place because it's close to his office.

After unlocking the last padlock I step inside, the ground floor serving as both coatroom and garage. My green Vespa is parked where I left it this morning in a puddle of motor oil. I wonder what's wrong with it this time. Maybe Wyatt was right and I should have bought a new Honda Dream after all, even if they are ugly and boring. As soon as this thought enters my mind I feel disloyal, as if my dodgy, old Vespa is a mind-reader. I give the bike a guilty pat. I'll get it fixed this weekend.

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Next to the stairs, a half-dozen boxes are filled with so-called essentials that I'd had shipped from New York, where I spent the last seven years studying and working. I look away, the boxes yet another source of guilt. I've been here for four months and have yet to get round to unpacking them. It'll have to wait until after the wedding.

I kick off my wet flats and shake the raindrops off of my garment bag, imagining the dress within. I picture Wyatt's face when he sees me in it for the first time, then check my watch. There's still time for me to have a quick shower and try the dress on again. I want to see it with my shoes and tiara.

Our bedroom is on the fourth floor, so I'm panting by the time that I get there. A glance in the hall mirror reveals that my mascara has run. My hair's a mess too, the longer bits lank and the bangs frizzy. I make a face into the mirror, wishing, as usual, that my face weren't so round. While six months of dieting have allowed me to look great in my wedding dress, no cheekbones have surfaced. I suck in my cheeks and sigh. It's hard not to compare myself to my little sister, Lauren, who has the bone structure of a Slavic ballerina.

When I step into the bedroom I stop. The curtains are drawn, which is weird, and the air-conditioner is on full-blast. Has Wyatt come home sick today? I start to call his name but think better of it. Maybe he's sleeping.

Without realizing what I'm doing, I sniff. There's a strange flowery smell in here. In my damp clothes the room is freezing. Tiptoeing towards our bed I see that the duvet is piled into a heap. Some toes are peeking out. "Honey?" I say softly. "Are you okay, babe?" The toes wiggle.

In the gloom, it takes a moment to register. I lean closer. My mouth goes dry. The toes feature shiny red toenails.

The bottom of the duvet rustles and Wyatt's head pops out, just inches from those red-painted digits. His dark hair is sticking straight up and there's a smear of red lipstick on his chin. Seeing me, his eyebrows shoot to the top of his face

and his mouth forms a little *o*, giving him the look of a cartoon hedgehog. “Oh,” he says. The toes stop wiggling.

I hug the garment bag to my chest and take a small step backwards. “Wyatt?” I say. “What are you...”

The top end of the duvet is tossed back to reveal a woman, her pretty face framed by long, black hair. Registering my presence, her dark eyes glint with triumph. I take another step back and she smiles, as though she finds my shock amusing.

“Oh God,” says Wyatt. He burrows under the duvet and reappears at the top end, his head now beside the woman’s. “Jane, damn it, I didn’t mean for you to find out like this. God, this is...” He shakes his head, then glances at the woman beside him. “This is so awkward.”

“Awkward?” I say, the scene still unreal to me. How is it possible that Wyatt, who less than a year ago had asked me to move to Hanoi—and marry him, is now lying in our bed, naked, with this this...? I glance back at the woman — early twenties, attractive, Asian but doesn’t look local. “Awkward?” I stammer. “Our wedding is three and a half weeks away.” I’m too stunned to be angry.

Wyatt pulls the duvet closer to his chin. He says that he’s sorry.

“Sorry?” I parrot, my mind blank.

Wyatt scratches his ear. He looks uncharacteristically nervous. “I didn’t plan to feel this way about Lindy...I just...” He glances beseechingly at his bedmate and shrugs. “It just...happened.”

At this the woman’s smirk curves into a sly smile. I continue to stare at Wyatt. What is he trying to tell me? That he is in love with this woman? I feel sick to my stomach.

“You two need time to talk,” says the woman, her French accent as manicured as her toenails. She gives me a condescending smile, her expression revealing neither pity nor embarrassment. “Can you get me a robe? I saw Wyatt’s hanging in the bathroom.”

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I open my mouth to respond but no sound comes out. Is this really happening to me? I wonder if I'm going to throw up. I count to 10 and try to breathe slowly.

The woman, Lindy, looks exasperated. With an exaggerated sigh, she turns to Wyatt. “*Cheri*,” she says. “Could you get me that robe *please*? I can’t get out of bed like this with her,” she nods my way, “just standing there.”

I wait for Wyatt to say that he’s not her *cheri*, but he’s too busy looking under the bed for his boxer shorts. “Hold on a sec,” he says when he’s found them. He turns away from me to slip into them.

I expect him to come over to me, to try to hug me, to start to explain, but instead he just stands there. When he starts to walk towards the bathroom, he moves like a man who’s been at sea for days. “Wyatt?” I say, my voice so small that even I don’t recognize it. “Aren’t you going to say something?”

He shrugs. “What can I say?”

I nod. He’s right. What *can* he say? Our wedding is less than a month away and he and this woman were just fu-fu... I can’t even bring myself to think it. I take a deep breath. “Our wedding,” I say. “What about our wedding?”

Even as I say it, I know how pathetic I sound. I just caught my fiancé cheating on me and yet I’m still thinking of marrying him. Am I crazy or just totally desperate?

I figure that I’m a little of both given that, even with this other woman lying naked in our bed, my main concern is the wedding. But how could it not be, when I’ve spent my whole life planning it?

Long before I liked boys, I was obsessed with all things bridal. At age four I refused to go anywhere unless I had a long swathe of mosquito netting pinned to my head, like a veil. While other kids collected rocks or stickers I collected those hideous plastic pom-poms that people in the 1970s and 1980s used to decorate their wedding cars. I had hundreds of the things, which I’d wash and blow-dry before arranging into fluffy pastel rows on my bookcase.

I've been with Wyatt for six years: five of them spent waiting for him to propose and the last one organizing our wedding. But the wedding planning didn't start with Wyatt. I've envisioned every guy I ever dated, including the ones I didn't especially like, as potential husbands. There was Willy Dobson, who stuck his tongue in my mouth at Camp Pocahontas when I was 15. There was Brent Gobrowsky, the guy who took me to prom after the guy I wanted to take me to prom (who I also envisioned marrying) asked my little sister instead. There was my college boyfriend Doug, who later dropped out of school and reportedly became a Zen monk. I even imagined my one and only one-night stand, a Norwegian dive-instructor named Brokk, saying 'I do' in his sexy Scandinavian accent.

Given all those years of anticipation, the idea that this wedding might *not* happen seems impossible. It's like being told that the earth is flat after all, and that I'm about to fall off of it.

"We can't," says Wyatt. "I mean, I can't." His eyes slide back towards Lindy.

I too look at Lindy and immediately regret it, her smug smile bringing hot, angry tears to my eyes. Rather than cry in front of her, I turn and careen down the staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs I stop. I am trying not to hyperventilate. Clinging to the banister, I shut my eyes and wait, sure that Wyatt will follow me. He'll want to explain. I imagine what he'll say: he was drunk; she seduced him; it only happened this one time and he is so, so sorry.

Just when I think that I can't wait another second I hear him, descending the steps so slowly and quietly that I wonder if he's on tiptoes. I look up to see him shuffling across the first floor landing as if he's stepping across a hangman's scaffold. He looks so wretched that if I hadn't just caught him cheating on me, I'd feel sorry for him.

Seeing me, Wyatt stops walking. "Jane?" He swallows hard. "... I feel really bad about this but I can't, we can't..." He studies his hands. "We can't get married."

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I want to tell him that he's wrong, all the invitations have been sent, all the napkins have been ordered, all the food has been catered, but no sound comes out.

"I know this is awfully sudden but I need time to figure things out, to figure out what I want. We need to take a break." The words speed out of him, crash against each other and pile up in a mangled heap, like a train wreck.

I hear the sound of screeching brakes and a wild, crazy clanging. With all of that noise going on inside of my head it's hard to think. "A break?" I whisper. "But our wedding..."

"I—I can't," says Wyatt. "We have to cancel—"

Still pressing the garment bag to my chest, I feel the world tilt. Is it really possible? I grip the banister.

Seeing my face, Wyatt stops talking. "Postpone," he says. "We need to postpone the wedding. We can't get married right now, not like this. I need to figure this out." He shakes himself, then stands a bit straighter.

I have a vision of Wyatt in some meeting negotiating with difficult clients, trying to convince them that what he wants is in their best interest. "We need time to work through this," he says, looking down as if to survey some imaginary notes. "You'd better call your parents about the arrangements." He clears his throat. "I'll deal with my family."

I'm not sure what pushes me over the edge but all of a sudden I'm sobbing. It's as if all the tears and snot that I've been holding in come out all at once, so that one moment I'm relatively self-possessed and the next I'm blotchy, slimy and blubbering.

Wyatt stays put, leaning over the balustrade of the first-floor landing. We're like the antithesis of Romeo and Juliet, me on the ground, sobbing, and Wyatt peering down at me. "Don't cry," he says. He looks alarmed and revolted, like I'm a slug that he just stepped on.

I throw my wedding dress to the floor, grab my bag and stuff my feet into my still-wet ballet flats. Making a

conscious effort not to look back I stumble out the door, too blinded by tears to see where I'm going. I can hear Wyatt calling after me but he sounds half-hearted.

Once outside, I turn left and start walking, the street mercifully deserted. It's raining harder than ever and an early dusk has set in. Families are cooking dinner, the street smelling of grilling meat and fish sauce. I pass a pagoda, its tiered roofs dripping and its empty courtyard full of mud puddles. In the fading light the street looks unfamiliar, the pagoda's curved roofs a reminder that I'm far, far from home. Behind the pagoda's wall a gong sounds, its long quavering note giving voice to my desolation.

Bowing my head against the deluge I feel sick and bewildered. What should I do? Should I go to a hotel? I wish that I were home in Raleigh or back in New York. At least there I could run to an old friend, someone who really knows me.

Taking imperfect shelter beneath the pagoda's spreading banyan, I stop and pull out my cell phone. Still fighting back tears, I scroll through the list of names until I get to Sigrid's. Although we've only been friends for a few months, Sigrid will know what to do. She is, after all, an expert in Disaster Management.