

Little Pink Shoes

MARISSA

They just sit there, dangling, pink and faded. I unhook the ballet shoes from the mauve-and-wallpaper closet door silent and careful. The shoes I never danced in. The aged fabric insides say Sam and Libby and I picture large stacks of white oversized cardboard shoeboxes beneath a white fiberboard shelf; row upon row of tiny shoes, just my size.



Rochelle's might have been the name. I remember it distinctly as "the place with the big shell." Shaped like a gaping oyster and lavishly covered with glitter it sat there like an oracle throughout my childhood ominously collecting my pennies which I would toss feebly to it thinking maybe this one would be the one; maybe this penny would release its greatness.

Mom finishes speaking with a woman at a counter nearby and looks down at me. "Do you wanna look at shoes first, or dresses?"

"Shoes!" I exclaim excitedly.

Mom takes my small hand in hers and we rush to the shoe department where I pick out a pair of small lace up ballet slippers in just the right shade of pink. They were magic.



I put down the shoes and unlatch the door with a clack. It creaks as I open it revealing a collection of dresses none of which had been touched in years, but all of which were purchased by my mother in the very same shell store. Shopping is what my mother and I did. My childhood, where my mother is concerned, is peppered with department stores, dressing rooms, and endless lines. Constantly I followed her through store after store paying bill after bill until I was old enough to wait in the car. I remember sitting in the grocery store parking lot for what was literally hours, watching the

employees change shifts to collect the carts scattered all over the parking lot. Once I realized that it was either wait in the car for ages or follow mum around the store, I gave in and followed her. There was no rushing mom.



On one particular occasion we went grocery shopping. We left the store with our bags and returned to the car, which for the record, had more problems than it did working parts. I say something but she doesn't seem to notice, and to me that's normal. I'm accustomed to the fact that my mom just doesn't seem to notice much, actually she seems to be noticing less and less. I go to the passenger side door and wait for my mother to take out her keys. For some reason the process seems painstakingly long and after a few minutes my legs and arms are covered with goose bumps. The wind is always against you when you don't have the car keys.

"Mooommm, what's taking so long?"

"I'm just looking for the keys honey." But there is something in her look that says otherwise.

"Mom! What are you doing?!"

"Nothing, Marissa! I'm just getting the keys!"

"No you're not, I can see them." She makes one last jerky movement before getting in the car and slamming the door.

"That asshole shouldn't have parked so damn close. That's wrong. It's just *wrong*," she says. Her expression is contemptuous, spiteful. I stay silent. I'm ten years old and I have to tell my mom that that the SUV which she just gave a good scraping was actually parked within the lines. Really her car was the one closest to the line.



I peer around, moving hangars, looking through all the outfits that once fit me. I pick out a flower print dress holding it to my chest. This one must have fit me when I was 5. Jesus. It might fit my leg.



“Hey Susan, you’re here! How are you?”

“Oh, heh, we’ll talk about *that* later.” She laughs heartily and introduces me to the stranger towering above me.

“This is my daughter, Steve, this is Marissa.”

“Why, hello there little lady!” The man before me has thin brownish hair and a crooked smile. I quietly say hello. This man makes me uncomfortable.

“You certainly have your mom’s hair, I can see that.” He laughs loudly. I look over at my mom but she’s busy talking to another man, this place is terribly crowded and she isn’t paying attention. This scares me. I really don’t like this man. I want out. I want mom.

“That sure is a pretty dress you’ve got there, you like flowers?” I look over at mom again. He takes this as a yes. “So do you know what this is?” I shake my head quickly. *Mom*, I plead to myself. “It’s a club!” I’m confused now. A club? Mom’s in a club? “Isn’t that neat? You know what for?” I shake my head again. “It’s the gap tooth club! See?!” He grins widely and his front teeth bear a large gap between them, just like mine. “You’re in it too!” He chuckles as my mom returns shooting “Steve” a quizzical look. He smiles and she just laughs, grabbing my hand.

“We’ll see you later,” she says. Mom leads me into another room filled with more people, but quieter than the last. She sits me on the couch in my pink shoes and flower dress the only child in a sea of adults. Here, I quickly drift off with the sounds of chattering voices and laughter, the sound of mom’s drunken voice coaxing me to sleep. These are her friends. This is mom having fun.



Looking through this closet gives me a headache, the stale, humid air filling my lungs but not moving. I place the dress on the bed and make my way downstairs for some water and aspirin. I watch each stair carefully, so many times I’ve tread them, even managing to tumble down them once or twice, or five times. I reach the kitchen, the light filtering through the picture window straining my eyes. I grab a glass and reach to open the cabinet and remove the bottle of aspirin when I spot the small maroon journal my mother takes to her “meetings.” I stop what I’m doing and glide my

fingers over the small pattern of the plastic cover remembering the first and last time I read this journal.



It lay on the countertop below the medicine cabinet, it is mid-afternoon and I am waiting for my mother as usual. She was making us late for yet another thing. I pick up the journal making the pages fan out at will. I wait for them to quiet, seizing glimpses of each. One catches my eye and I try in vain to reach the entry before it passes. Flipping quickly, my curiosity growing, I find the page.

Please Lord; help me stay away from marijuana . . .

I search frantically for a date, anything, any sign of when this was written in all its ineloquent glory. Nothing. No mention of it ever again. No sign, hint or anything I recognized or could relate to any date. I suddenly feel annoyed, suspicious.

I hear footsteps on the stairs and thrust the journal on the counter. This is not my problem right now.



I slip into a seat at the kitchen table directly in the sunlight. It feels warm on my skin. I turn the cup in my hands watching the rainbows it makes on the table, my thoughts on my mother and the small book on the counter. I doubt she's even written in that journal for ages. I silently hope that she's been more diligent in attending her Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Those meetings, those were the worst as a kid. Boring beyond belief and filled with strangers. It didn't take me long to figure out what they were. Knowing she was trying might have made them sparkle, but thinking back, it might have made them blander; she never seemed to try hard enough. The aspirin sticks in my throat and I swallow hard, the frustration of thinking and swallowing obstructing the way to my stomach.



Two days prior I'm in the living room looking for batteries in what my friend and I refer to as "the pot drawer" namely because it doesn't just smell but reeks of pot. For the last time I decide that I am going to find where the hell this stash of hers is. Sarah and I have spent a year looking for it. Every time we come up with nothing. This time I am determined. I will know once and for all where it is. I will find proof.

I go to my mother's room and think, just where would she put it? Where would I put it, if I were her? I think again to the closet having searched the room again with nothing to show. The closet is packed full with dresses and sweaters, suits and my step-father's ties and jackets. Shoes litter the floor along with bags and boxes. One box has a metal coffee can perched on top just beneath a pair of pants. I look at the shelf above, peeling my eyes for possible containers. Then I do a double-take. That coffee can was not there before. Quickly I move the pants out of the way and grab it. It is blue with a plastic cover and has some brand written across the side that I just don't recognize. I look through the cover but don't see much. The can is fairly light. I feel like this isn't it but I open it anyway. Inside is a wrapped up plastic bag and suddenly I smell it. I've found it. I've found my answer.

Eventually the aspirin makes it was down my throat and I toss my glass into the sink. I head to the laundry room as I hear the sound of my mom pulling into the driveway, the stones crunching beneath her tires, the sound always creating this anxiousness in my stomach. I listen for the screen door to screech open like it always does, and soon enough . . .

"Rissa! I'm ho-ome and I've got a surprise for you, I'm gonna need your help though. We're gonna make it for Aunt Mary's party tonight. Oh you're going be so suprised!" I work up the energy and compose myself, walking into the kitchen casually.

"Hey, what did you get?" I say returning to the wooden chair perched at the table.

"Oh it's a surprise. I'll show you when I come back; I've just gotta go use the bathroom first." She hooks her purse on the chair and goes upstairs.

"Ok." I turn back to the window and something hits my nose, a pungent and familiar smell. *No*. I pick up the purse and put it on the counter. I bend down to catch a whiff of anything and take out her wallet. I turn the red leather over in my hand swiftly and open it, nothing out of the ordinary, receipts change, a five dollar bill, a flower purple piece of paper that looks like it came from a card, I take it out and notice that it is folded so I carefully untangle the paper finding exactly what I'd feared.

I just can't think back on all the years we've lived here together and make sense of them. Shopping and blowing money was our only way to connect, and all it ever did was cause tension anymore. Realizing where all the money was really going was the part that killed me the most. There was never food in the house, mom was never home, and I could never even pick up the phone because it might be a bill collector. All the money she spent and never on anything useful. The most good she probably ever did with it was toss it in a church basket to fill someone else's mouth with food instead of ours, or at least their wallet, when we needed it ourselves. But no, where did she put it all? She spent it on drugs: alcohol when I was younger, and marijuana since before I was born.

I can't help but feel sick with frustration. I fold up the paper and stuff it angrily back in the sleeve from which I took it. Years ago, she lied saying she wouldn't do "those things." Those things she never admitted to but did all along, those things unnamable and controlling. Those things that made her think she could buy my love, win it over with marijuana scented dollar bills. It was these things that made everything ok. They fixed all the danger she put me in as a child. They emptied her bank account, my bank account, and now they were losing this very house. The very thought was sickening.

I spent all day packing up what I wanted to keep and what would go to charity or the dump. I ended up with one box; one box of things I wanted to keep. A Staples paper box; out of an entire house a Staples paper box. I was tired, angry and disappointed. Least of all, this was not what I wanted for an answer. I didn't want to think that in danger of losing the one thing she and my stepfather had, she couldn't quit the one habit that would push them under. But her purse reeked of the truth and that made it impossible to ignore. This was the last straw; something had to be done and as usual, I had to step up and do it.

"So you want to see what we're going to make?"

"Make?"

"Yes we're going to make something special." A green bag full of lemons makes a loud thunk on the table beside me. Lemonade. "Ok I need *you* to squeeze these lemons. Hmmm, let me think . . . what can you use? She grabs a spoon and a bowl after I bring it to her attention that I need something to put it in, and places them next to me. I squeeze and scrape at each lemon, draining the life out of each. Over a period of 15 minutes I manage to squelch the juice out of 6 lemons and lose feeling in my finger from getting so much of the precious fluid in a hangnail. I can hardly contain it anymore of mum's idle chatter when I blurt out, "Did you really go to church this morning?" I'm

not entirely sure what kind of question it is but it seems legitimate. I didn't imagine anyone would dare ask their forgiveness while half stoned.

"Of course I was late, so I missed the first bit but yeah, I was there, why Rissa?" I can feel frustration like bile in my throat.

"Well you came home with your purse reeking of pot." I hastily add, "and the bathroom stinks when Bob goes to work." She just stares back at me with stony eyes and says, "I cannot speak for Bob."

"Well, did you think I wouldn't realize? Were you embarrassed, what?" She just looks at me caught halfway between apologetic and defensive. "Were you telling me the truth when you said you'd quit, or were you just hiding it from me?"

"For a time."

"So you did; quit, for a time."

"I tried." At that moment my stepfather pulls in the drive and enters the kitchen, straight into the tightest silence I'd ever experienced. He goes off to change his shirt and I'm left to face my mother, but unable to say anything. He returns, kissing my mom on the cheek as she speaks in a flat and feeble voice, "Bye Bob."

I break the silence by telling her it's her life, her choice, they can do whatever they want; it is not my place to say, but that I wish she didn't have to and that it made me uncomfortable. I tell her that I'm never getting in a car with either of them again as long as they are under the influence. I refuse to place anyone I love intentionally in harm's way. I will not risk that, and I don't see why I should have to risk myself either. After that I leave her there. She doesn't speak to me any further for the rest of the day. Even choosing to get angry and lay blame for the day's events on me, but she does not mention drugs in the least, instead choosing to scold me for making her late. I simply take it and return to my room to continue packing.

Once I've finished there are bags strewn across the floor like monuments of disposable waste. I make to move them when I spot the ballet shoes in a heap, small and pink against the beige carpet. I think to myself that there is no turning back; what has happened has happened and cannot be undone. My childhood memories may be clearer to me now in what they really were, parties and Keno cards at bars filled with my birthday digits, but there were things that were special to me, like my mother. She may have done wrong, but at least I can see it. I'd rather learn than live in my childish ignorance forever; we all have to outgrow those things, be they shoes or attitudes. And with that last thought I picked up the shoes and all the things they reminded me of, and placed them gently in the red Staples box at my feet, right where they belong, with me always.