

Grown-Up Shoes

Your mother isn't much of a cook. The food comes out of tins and packets. You're nine years old and you've never tasted real mashed potatoes. She uses the freeze dried stuff, adding water from the kettle and a knob of margarine to make it edible. It's only a couple of years since the microwave was invented and you can't remember what happened before that. The grease stains on the hob came from its previous owners; since it's been in your kitchen it hasn't seen a saucepan. You know that something is amiss when you get up for school on a Monday morning and there's a fried breakfast waiting on the table. You look around, wondering who else is in the house. She must have found a new boyfriend over the weekend. 'Go on,' she says, pointing at it with a spatula you didn't know you had. 'Need some substance, don't you? You're a growing girl, you are.'

You know that substance is not a real word but you don't have the patience to explain it to her, and you're hungry, so you sit at the table and take a cautious first bite. The fried bread is burnt, part of the pan lining glued to it, and the egg is runny and malformed. You concentrate on the baked beans instead. As you're onto the third mouthful she sits down in the chair opposite, her hands curled around a dirty mug, a cigarette between her fingers. 'Think you can do me a little favour,' she says. 'Now I've fed you up nice and full?'

'What?' you say. 'What now?'

'Run down to the big pine end house on the main road.'

'What for?' you say. 'I've got to go to school.'

'My shoes,' she says. 'My best leopard-print stilettos. I threw them in the front garden on my way home last night.' She smiles her lopsided smile, a plume of blue smoke coming out of the side. 'Go on, it won't take you five minutes.'

'Why'd you throw them away if they're your best?' you ask, puzzled.

'My feet were tired,' she says.

'You could have carried them,' you say.

Your mother closes her eyes and tilts her head backwards, thinking about something; a fleeting suggestion of happiness on her face. She's remembering her walk home from the pub last night. Somehow you can see it too, the orange street light glinting in her teeth, the skirt of her summer dress fluttering in the breeze, the man on her arm, tall and hairy and smelling of cider. She giggles drunkenly as she stoops down to remove her shoes. 'Bloody things,' she says hurling them over the garden wall next to her, as if shoes are something that grow on trees, something that come free as fresh air. You imagine her tiptoeing on the balls of her bare feet, avoiding the smashed glass and dog turds, hoping that the man will offer her a piggy-back.

You click your tongue at your mother, disgusted. 'You could have hurt yourself,' you say.

'Go on,' she says, widening her eyes. 'It's only half past eight. They're probably still there.'

You've got combined science at nine o'clock with Mrs. Morgan, which you love. 'Why can't you get them yourself?' you ask. 'They're your shoes, aren't they? You shouldn't have thrown them away.'

Why did you throw them away? It makes no sense.'

'Because-' your mother barks, failing to complete her sentence. She stubs her cigarette out in the ashtray with fierce blows, then stands up and whips your half-eaten breakfast from under you, loudly scraping it into the bin. For a quiet life you decide you have to go to the garden of the big pine end house on the main road. 'OK,' you say as sternly as you possibly can. You thump your fist on the table for effect. 'I'll go to look for your shoes, but I'm warning you now, this is the last time.'

When you get back to the kitchen ten minutes later, your mother is standing at the washing-up bowl, staring out of the window, her eyes glassy with her daydream, last night's bright blue eye-make-up caked in the corners. 'Bad luck Mammy,' you say, 'all I could find was this.' You put the baby sock you found in the gutter on the placemat where your breakfast was earlier, the fraying white cotton grubby with rainwater and dirt. 'Did you have a proper look?' she says. You nod solemnly. You pick one of the artificial pearls sewn to the hem of the sock and hold it up close to your face, inspecting its shiny veneer. 'I looked everywhere,' you assure her. 'But they were your best shoes. Someone would

have snapped them up in a second. It's finder's keepers now. Perhaps your boyfriend went back and picked them up,' you say. 'A present for his wife?'

'I'm only a size four,' she hisses, 'and that woman's got big boat feet like a man.'

You shrug. You look at the clock. It's ten to nine, science starting soon. 'I've got to go to school,' you say, skipping out of the kitchen, your schoolbag bouncing on your shoulder. As you reach the school gate the other kids are rushing inside, the morning bell pulsating through the building. You sit down on the steps for a minute, fishing your mother's best leopard-print stilettos out of your bag. You rip a few blank pages from the back of your science exercise book and scrunch them tight into the toes of the lovely grown-up shoes. You throw your scuffed, lace-up pumps over the railings and into the ditch next to the boy's football pitch. 'Bloody things,' you say as you watch them go.

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