

IN HER SHOES

Eyes meeting across a crowded room is a bit of a cliché. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but it happens countless times in a single night. This was different, a one-off moment of instant recognition. This was Some Enchanted Evening, with shoes. It was the same shoe, purple and translucent. Beside it was firmly planted a pale brown, be-socked foot.

My eyes lifted to look at his face. The first thing I noticed was the distance they had to travel. Or rather, lack of it. He was short, by anyone's measurements. Not good looking, almost ugly, but not unattractive. Sandy haired, but dark eyes.

"How did you – how did it end upon my foot?"

"Practical joke. I was the victim. Long story, the perpetrators left me with this."

From a big, leather satchel he brought out a white and gold sandal. Esteban Cortazar.

"That's mine."

Of course it was. I'd spent a week mourning its loss.

Those shoes had been bought, on the rebound some might say. Except I was still well splattered all over the wall or ground or wherever it is you're supposed to rebound from. Lacking the required elasticity, I was a long way off bouncing back. Those shoes were a glorious, bank busting nihilistic splurge of despair.

Not that they were purchased in haste. In the weeks leading up to Ivan's betrayal my shoe studies – fetish is too frivolous a word for the discipline, time, acquisition of knowledge, aesthetic fine-tuning it took, I was a subject specialist, an expert witness – took on a new intensity. If anyone was qualified to spend £500 on a pair of designer shoes, it was me. My internet searches narrowed from scores of shoes to a handful. Beautiful glittery embroidery from Nicholas Kirkwood, or an embossed platform in deep

purple from Prada ? Guiseppe Zanotti's snaky golden sandal or Jimmy Choo's feather fronted Romanesque creation ? I tracked down in real, physical time Manola Blahnik diamante sandals, I touched Miu Miu's gold lame backs and actually had on my feet Charlotte Olympia's teetering ankle strapped take on Venetian Carnival. But the real search was on for the holy grail of shoes, a pair of pure white sandals with seven inch heels and a perfectly polished gold ankle cuff by Esteban Cortazar. If I could just wear those shoes for one moment I could die happy, with wings on my feet.

Or so I thought. As it turns out it was misery that brought us together. And a pair of Bloch dance sneakers. Coming home to find Ivan face down on the IKEA Jokkmokk dining table between said footwear belonging, and firmly attached to the feet of, the foxy dancer from the promotions team.

I'd known he was after her. Ever since the company party where she'd shown her moves on the dance floor, pulling him up to gyrate around her. "You don't mind do you ?" he asked me after the first round "Avril has two left feet" an explanation to our group stooping around the beer bottles.

It's true, I'm not a great dancer. In fact, apparently I'm one of those people who manages to dance off beat even to thumping drum and bass. It's quite a difficult thing to do, so I'm told. Two left feet, that's me. The foxy dancer definitely had one of each and that teatime when I walked in they were wrapped around my boyfriend's bare, pumping arse.

It was two days before I could hit the shops. Ivan had already gone but the act still held a symbolic defiance. He thought my shoe collection ridiculous, my ability to spend a whole evening on vertiginous heels and even run for a bus at the end of it, was not a skill he appreciated. Referencing Germaine Greer, he referred to them as my Fuck Me Shoes. Which he obviously sometimes did. But ultimately opting to fuck the Bloch 524 Criss Cross dance sneakers.

It took me a day of hunting. I'd done an internet search, made phone calls and then a tour of my favourite West End shoe shops. I'd almost given up when, late in the afternoon there they were. In the window of a shop I'd never seen before. They were even more beautiful than the images, a golden zip up the back and a delicate tracking of gold around the sole. The leather as soft as a murmur, the cuff a glowing halo for a well

turned ankle. I hardly dared hope they'd have them in my size but they did. It was meant to be. On my feet they whispered to me of future bliss and glory. Five hundred and sixty pounds was a small price for such things.

That was just over a week ago. That evening I had a humdinger of a night out with Stephen, Hayley and the twins. My so called friends. I was of course wearing the shoes, at least at the beginning of the evening. OK so I do get a bit belligerent when I have had one too many and that evening I definitely had several too many. But who wouldn't get pie faced when not two days earlier they had found their boyfriend servicing a pair of split-sole trainers? When I told my friends to Fuck Right Off I didn't really expect them to. The rest is, as they say, history, but a history I have absolutely no recollection of and must now piece together. I woke up at home, in bed, fully dressed including my shoes. Or rather, one of my shoes, the right one. On my left foot was a man's shoe.

When I first saw it I thought I must be hallucinating. It had a shimmering quality, reflecting the light like it wasn't really there. Translucent almost. Something about the leather, soft yet shiny, the colour – mauve ? silver ? copper ? green ? It had different panels which changed with each blink of the eye. I must say it was a handsome shoe, the cut was classic elegance, vintage inspired around the toe, yet contemporary in line from lace to heel. If I were a man I'd love these shoes. But I was frantic for my missing Cortazar.

The sandy haired, dark eyed man was now holding it about a foot away from my face.

“I had a hunch that the owner of this might have my shoe. Were you in on the caper?” He was giving me a sideways look, as if to ask me straight out would be a touch too forward.

“What caper ? I'm a victim too. If this is the work of pranksters, I'd like to know who they are.”

An idea struck me. What if the Great Shoe Heist had in fact been a huge jape? What if Hayley, Steven and this sandy haired, not-too-good-looking, comfortably

shorter-than-average stranger had cooked it up as a hilarious play upon my foot-based obsessions?

A millisecond later I dismissed the idea, but the thought had done me good. Suddenly, the gut-tumbling pain of Ivan's pedo-romantic betrayal had receded.

"I must take responsibility there I think". He had a slight Irish lilt to his voice, but a hint of something else slightly European. "I'm pretty sure it was my friends who did this" He was on the stool beside me and there we sat, the sandy-haired stranger and me, each singly shod, drinking together. I told him the whole sorry shoe story – starting with Ivan and the Fuck Me shoes, Ivan and the Sneaker clad dancer, the hunt for Cortazar, the lost evening, waking up with The Wrong Shoe.

"And you've been looking for the owner ever since?" We both twirled our single, shoeless feet.

"It's taken me a week to visit all the pubs we went to that night" I said

"Me too. And, like me, you've been out every night with one shoe?"

"Yes. Its sort of – an act of penance."

Time seemed to have passed without my noticing. I'd had a few drinks. The shoe he was wearing seemed even more shimmery and lovely than the one placed on the bar between us. It was like meeting the beautiful twin of a child I had adopted.

"I can understand why you wouldn't want to lose that shoe. Under what circumstances do so-called friends pull a stunt like that?"

"It's amazing the tribulation that passes for merry wittiment on a stag night"

"Whose stag night?" I knew the answer.

"Well, I was led to believe it was mine."

The barman was in front of us, pulling a pint for the customer at the end of the bar. The shoe lying between me and the stranger had a tiny splash of froth on it.

“I don’t know why I wore the shoes out,” he was saying, “I was supposed to be married in them the next day. My whole wedding outfit was designed around those shoes.”

“You do that too?” I said miserably, “plan a whole look based on shoes?”

He nodded slowly. “See, I was brought up in an institution where we had just the one pair of boots each. Shoes are my Thing. Anyway, when I woke up next morning with your sandal where my shoe should have been, the whole proposition started to fall apart. The outfit was ridiculous without the shoes. And I realised the wedding was all about the outfit. I was about to commit a fraudulent act if I’d gone ahead”.

I noticed both our glasses were empty, and looked down at the stranger’s single shoe. His tan, socked foot was tapping the stool rhythmically.

“So, you pulled out?”

“Yes. For the want of a shoe, the battle was lost, you could say.”

“You lost your shoe and your marriage in one prank?”

“I should act all bitter and blame my mates for the sixty years of lonely singledom I’m now facing. Another drink?”

I nodded, thanks. He gestured to the barman.

“On the other hand, I could say the bastards did me a favour.”

“It was doomed from the start?”

“Saved from a terrible mistake – by your sandal.”

He took the sandal, kissed it and gave it to me. It had a new worth alongside its role as my restorer – Saviour of Sandy Haired Stranger From Disastrous Marriage.

Our drinks arrived. I took a deep slug of wine.

I put the white and gold sandal beside the purple shoe at the bar, which was swimming in a refracted halo of magenta and violet.

“I think this shoe is magic,” I slurred. I wasn’t sure whether it was the alcohol on an empty stomach, or the spell of the two shoes, which had apparently conspired to bring us together. Side by side and semi-shod, sharing a common story of loss in the love and footwear departments.

“Perhaps so,” he said. “Or we could believe it is anyway. I feel we’re good enough friends now to share a little shot of whimsy”.

“I don’t even know your name,” I leaned towards him.

“Harry. Harry Merlotti”

“Merlotti.” The name stuttered in and out of an image it belonged to. “That’s the name on the shoe. You designed it.”

“Sure. It’s the only pair like it. I guess they were supposed to be my Fuck Me shoes”

“You’re a shoe designer !” The spell was complete. Suddenly I was flooded with affection, admiration, compassion and lust for this no-longer stranger Harry, the orphan who grew up with one pair of boots, who turned his destiny around to become a shoe designer, and whose passion for shoes saved him from a loveless marriage. I stood up unevenly, handed him the enchanted shoe and cupped my hands around his.

“Harry Merlotti. Allow me to put this shoe on your foot. For six nights I have shared my bed with it.”

I bent over carefully, concentrating hard not to topple over. I managed to get down on one knee and thrust the shoe forward with a true pantomime flourish. I took his foot in my hand.

“Oh my God!”

I was looking at two left shoes.

“What ? What is it?”

“It’s the wrong shoe. This is a left shoe. You should be wearing the right”

I ‘m pretty sure I heard him curse under his breath. Then, “Are you sure?”

“I know a thing or two about two left feet.”

“Does it matter ?”

“Of course it matters.”

“Why ?”

It was a question I couldn’t answer. Instead, I turned, wordlessly, and hobbled, one shoed out of the bar door, remembering to take its pair with me.

Outside on the street I put the white and gold sandal on my left foot. I zipped up the back and stepped out down the street clack clack in my Don’t Fuck With Me Shoes.