

# Dancing Shoes

*by* Dallas Woodburn

Though she is looking at me, I sense she is seeing someone else. Somewhere else. Maybe a long time ago.

Her hair looks like cotton and a silk scarf is draped elegantly across her frail shoulders. Plum lipstick outlines lips almost vanished with age; blush is caked into the web of wrinkles upon her cheeks.

She looks at my tower of opened shoeboxes, a rainbow of stilettos and pumps and kitten heels peeking out of thin paper wrappings, and smiles at me. Her smile seems sixty years younger than the rest of her. I smile back, sheepishly, then turn my attention to slipping on another ill-fitting shoe, this time a strappy dress sandal. I don't have anything against heels when they are sitting on the display racks. It's my feet that are the problem. When my feet and high heels get together, blisters are inevitably the result.

I try to imagine my parents' faces if I showed up to my uncle's wedding in the beaded yellow dress my mom picked out coupled with fraying, dog-chewed bunny rabbit slippers.

I glance around for the saleswoman who was helping me a moment ago, but she's nowhere to be found. Maybe she's become lost behind My Leaning Tower of Shoeboxes, none of which contain footwear I will likely buy.

The old woman is still standing a few feet away from me, looking at the display of formal footwear along the wall. I watch her pick up a firecracker-red high heel and study it, holding it carefully with both hands, as if she is cradling an heirloom. She glances up and catches my gaze, smiles again, and gently places the vogue heel back on the shelf.

"We used to wear shoes like these," she explains without my prompting, her left hand still touching the firecracker-red number.

"My friends and I. When I was a young girl, just like you. We'd wear them to parties, and dances, and to school, too. High heels. Can you believe it? All of us girls would wear high heels to school. Buy all sorts of colors to match our outfits. So elegant. So grown-up, we

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thought. They make your calves look fabulous. You want to get a boy's attention, wear heels, I say."

I smile and nod awkwardly. She ponders the display rack of heels. I wonder what memory she is reliving. I wonder what she would look like if I could peel away her sagging skin to reveal a fresh new layer underneath.

"Of course, I can't wear heels anymore — arthritis, you know," she continues. "But sometimes, I just like to come and look." She's smiling still, but I can see now it's a smile laced with bittersweetness. "You're still young. Listen to me, now. You wear high heels, and you dance up a storm, okay? Drive all the boys crazy in your high heels."

She leans over and gives my arm a gentle squeeze before walking towards the store exit. I look for the saleswoman who — miracle of miracles — has reappeared across the room, trying to appear busy tidying up a display of brass-buckled pumps. She makes the mistake of glancing in my general direction; I wave at her. Though she tries to hide it, I can read the reluctance in her wilted footsteps as she closes the distance between us.

She forces a smile. "Can I get you anything else, miss?"

"Yes," I say. "Those firecracker-red high heels over there. Can I see them in a size nine, please?"

She leaves and not-too-quickly returns with another box and I slip them on, grabbing the handles of the chair for support as I wobble to my feet. I take a few unsteady steps around my shoebox barricade. Surprisingly... not *that* uncomfortable. With a little practice, they might even be fun to dance in. When I was a little girl, I would sometimes slip on my mother's high heels — enormous, they seemed to me then — and clomp around the kitchen tile floor. What wonderful noise they made, *clomp-clomp-clomp*. Playing at being grown-up. I forgot how much I love the sound of high heels on a tile floor. *Clomp, clomp, clomp*.

"I'll take 'em," I say, surprising myself almost as much as the saleswoman. "In fact, I think I'll wear them now." The saleswoman grabs the shoebox and rushes over to the register, presumably

before I change my mind, while I admire my new purchase in the little footstool mirror. Yes, the firecracker red will clash hideously with my "sunrise yellow" dress. Yes, my dad will be confused, and, yes, my mom will shake her head and scold me. But I'll dance up a storm. And my calves — oh, my calves will look fabulous.

