

JULIA'S SHOE

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Julia liked her shoes. They were made of suede. Blue. With a low platform sole. A small size for small feet. Julia was eight. They weren't school shoes; parties and special outings only. They had been a Christmas present from Aunt Molly. The box had been wrapped in red green yellow with ribbon and bow. Guessing what was in it turned unpacking it into a joy. Between ribbon and fingers a little battle started until the present was all revealed, even more beautiful. A Christmas present without disappointment. She knew Aunt Molly would make the right choice. They had seen the shoes in the Maisy Shop. A longer pause, a deeper glance, a magnet between Julia's eyes and the display had sealed the blue shoes' destiny.

Aunt Molly had a son who didn't want shoes. What he had wished for, he had received: games, games and games. Exactly three. Gus was seven. Each child saw the other as a rival, as someone to compete with for Aunt Molly's attention. He played tricks on Julia and teased her, she played tricks on Gus and teased him. Pebbles and darts were flying back and forth between them. In the evening they would fight over who had been the bigger trickster on the day. And come the following morning, their little games would resume with breakfast signalling the start.

Julia decided to store her shoes in their box to keep them free of dust. After each outing she would carefully repeat her small ritual, tying ribbon and bow around to keep the Christmas touch. Whenever she wore them she felt proud because they had a way of clinging that made her feel secure and confident. They fitted her feet like an icecream ball fits its cone, she liked to say. One day she came home after a party, took off her shoes but forgot to place them in their box. An understandable omission after an exciting afternoon. The shoes were placed hurriedly under her bed, next to the box.

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When she remembered her slip, she could only find one. Holding it, she started looking for its companion. Every spot in her room was searched. Also other rooms, cupboards and drawers. Gus was accused but denied it. He joined Julia in her anxious treasure hunt. Corner after corner showed their stubborn emptiness. Her hopes were dashed, the shoe was nowhere to be seen. It had mysteriously disappeared. Two solitary shoes, one in her hand, the other elsewhere. A jigsaw puzzle with a lost piece.

Such presents rarely could be bought again. The shop no longer stocked them nor similar ones. Other hands had bought them and unwrapped them. In the shop window the display had been removed. New shoes flaunted their styles. Julia picked a pair of white ones with straps and gloss. They fitted her feet well but without giving them the clinging effect which would make her walk tall. She had lost some confidence. The box was discarded. No more ribbon no more bow.

The long summer went on, hot and dry. Julia and Gus were just happy in thongs. He on bike rides, she playing in the back garden. The blue shoe became a memory. It cropped up in her mind for flitting moments, her mouth puckering with some left-over sorrow. She was an orphan too, just like either of her shoes, and was more than ever aware of it. Understanding the plight of her remaining shoe, she had tried to console it by filling it with tiny toys, hair combs, clips and jewellery.

Quite regularly after school, Julia would spend time with her dog, throwing balls for him to chase. One thrown a bit far fell into the pond. It was completely dry after weeks of drought. Here and there clumps of reeds and weeds were growing. The dog waded through them and picked up a grassy object looking like the carcass of an animal. He deposited it at Julia's feet. Torn, smelly, muddy, with

barely any trace of blue, her shoe had turned into a planter with a mix of water-weeds growing in it.

She put it amongst the flower pots on the verandah, emptied its companion of its trinkets and lined it up next to the muddy shoe, giving each the company of the other. A family reunion. One was still near-new, a well-nurtured orphan; the other had all the marks of neglect, of abandonment. It had lost its shape, its colour, its attraction, its use, its life. The pond had kept it on its mud bed and hidden it while the water was taking small bites from it.

The water was now nibbling at Julia. Minute bites inside her head, somewhere in the twists of her brain. She touched the muddy shoe as a caring gesture, and to reconnect, to tell it how she had missed it. It didn't respond. It was a dead shoe. A small sprout started to grow inside Julia, a sprout of anger.

She went to fetch a rock and walked into Gus' bedroom. His Christmas e-games were there on his bookcase. She gathered them and lined them up on the floor. All three of them. She crouched down, raised her hand, clenched her teeth, and listened to the rock blow the games apart.

