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A LOVE STORY,
OR WHY I HAVE A SHOE MUSEUM

BY JILL KEARNEY

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Like any true love story, this one got off to a wobbly start. The relationship began before I learned to walk. As an infant, I slept in a crib laced into a pair of corrective booties clamped to a metal bar, a remedy for bowlegs and pigeon toes. At six I developed a bone absorption problem in my heel which made me limp. That year we lived in Italy, and I toured the Foro Italico and Pompeii from a perch on my father's shoulders, a privilege that compensated almost completely for the pain. I imagined myself a young empress carried on a bier. The Italians knew how to make orthopedic shoes that were also beautiful — mine were a buttery blue leather boot with long laces, like ice skates without the blades. Later there were bunions, and a contraption velcroed to my toes that woke me in the night with a dull ache. By the time I was ten I was sporting oxford saddle shoes from an orthopedic shoe store while my friends wore stylish penny loafers. My shoe store, the one with the correctional devices displayed in the window, lay in the shadow of the El tracks in Chicago in a gloomy region of town frequented by recovering drug addicts and pamphleteers from the Watchtower.



Corrective shoes were one of the few new purchases permitted in my family — the rest of my apparel came from a range of thrift stores which we visited with a devotion that some families reserve for church. I should add that we also made pilgrimages to churches, but that was only in Italy and only to learn about the Renaissance.

Thrift shopping in my family addressed many needs; it was of course a practical solution to our fiscal constraints, but it was also a kind of quest and discipline and even if you look at it a certain way, a spiritual practice. Purchases from the Salvation Army and Goodwill supported good works in the world, and were a kind of mitzvah, a word I learned by being one of the only shiksas in my class at Francis Parker School. This may sound like a story of deprivation, but it is not. I wished we could occasionally buy new things, but in truth, thrifting was an eternal treasure hunt which taught resourcefulness and the rhythms of drama. It was thrilling precisely because of the scarcity, the competition, and the improbability of success.

I have learned as a grownup that it is not nearly as fun to waltz into Saks with a credit card as it is to search through heaps of ratty objects with a nose for the one beautiful thing which is calling your name. Thrifting honed my eye and created in me an affection for the hidden beauty of discarded things.



It was one of life's ingenious ironies, however, that the rare new purchase I was permitted as a child was a thing I would never want to wear. The annual trip to the Orthopedic Shoe Store was a reminder that I was somehow misshapen and in need of repair. I remember this feeling intensely, sitting in a Naugahyde chair, with a balding man who was not a prince kneeling before me on a slanted podium stool offering a shoe that was not made of glass. Would I prefer the big oafish white shoe or the brown lump? And when I saddled them up and strolled around, he followed me with his eyes, smiling, as if to say, aren't they exquisite, Cinderella? Can a ten-year-old pigeon-toed girl tell a grownup that she hates his wares? I pinched my lips together and mumbled my assent, and my mother took them to the register, and pulled out her wallet, and vast sums of money were exchanged. Even though I hated the shoes and wished I could go barefoot to school, there was something thrilling about purchasing a new thing that came wrapped in paper inside a cardboard box. In my family, we saved cardboard boxes and rubber bands. However, when I grew up and could afford shoes of my own, I adopted the approach that no one can see your feet because they are down so low. I wouldn't spend more than \$30 on a pair of shoes.



One summer when I was in college I was hired as a salesperson at the Shoe Port in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Provincetown was a fishing village that became a bohemian art colony which became in turn a tourist trap with saltwater taffy stores and a town crier dressed as a pilgrim posing for photographs with drag queens who walked up and down Commercial Street in miniskirts and stiletto heels. The Shoe Port was directly across the street from Town Hall and the rows of benches known locally as the Meat Rack, a prominent pick-up spot, and also a locus of street performance, war protests, and marijuana fumes.



That summer I acquired the arcane skill of guessing a customer's shoe size before they could tell me, even a linebacker wearing a dress. The Shoe Port possessed an impressive selection of size 11 high-heeled pumps. I came to love the other employees, including the diminutive shy son of the owners, and at night we all made our way to the Surf Club and drank Green Chartreuse and lost our inhibitions, and wagered our earnings on guessing the shoe sizes of every patron in the bar. I took particular pleasure in exercising this skill which I have learned you must employ to keep it honed. If I guessed your shoe size today, I would almost certainly be wrong.

We came to Provincetown because my father was a sculptor. He made things with welding torches and wax and objects he found at the dump. I grew up at his studio watching him make large, peculiar things. In those days hardly anyone bought sculpture, and hence, we lived simply and carefully, and never went to restaurants. We traveled extensively and had adventures, but when we did that, we camped, or lived in our car. In Italy, we lived in a sixth-floor walkup heated by a coal-burning stove.

We did not wear shoes in Provincetown, and maybe that is why I loved the town. We were barefoot from June to September, even on the blazing hot pavement or crossing the painful driveways lined with broken clam shells. In Provincetown the main order of business for barefoot children was to build museums on the sand flats while the tide was out, sketching the walls with our fingers in the sand, leaving gaps for doorways, and then displaying our instant collections of broken pottery, rusted whistles, hermit crabs, and string. Every day the tide erased my museum, and the next day a new museum came into being.

Dad was best known for making giant animals out of used car bumpers. On a few occasions, he made life-sized dinosaurs. He was a pretty decent sculptor, but he was an even better human being. He was kind and good-natured and loved more than anything to be asked to rescue something, such as a boat that had come off its mooring in a storm. He regarded the Queen of England and the mailman with equal affection and operated from the assumption that they were both probably good inside. He had a rotten childhood and a lot of hardships in life, including the war, and the fact that his wiring remained optimistic and hopeful made up for everything else about him one would wish to change, such as his penchant for alcohol. When I see people making things, I automatically love them. Not everyone who makes things is deserving of this affection, but I am too old to change. When I met my husband and learned that he made sausage I rearranged my plans in life. Lucky for me he deserved this trust.



About 20 years ago our family traveled to Venice, where I found the object which launched my shoe museum. It is a leather piece of sculpture in the form of a bare foot. But actually, it is a shoe. It is not a pair of shoes, but one shoe that is unfinished and lacking a mate.

Here it is:



There is treasure everywhere in Venice, but there is also a confounding maze of junky tourist shops selling useless trinkets and glass menageries. Increasingly these glass trinkets are not made in Murano or Burano but in China. When I travel, I read the guidebooks before I go and try to find the last person in that town who is still making things.

Besides my affection for my father, there are other reasons to love the fact that there are still a few people making something with their own hands. It feels to me as though almost every ordinary action of daily life has been extracted like a bad tooth and mechanized. I had read that there were two cobblers still in Venice making shoes by hand.

The first store was very elegant and a little forbidding. The proprietor was a man named Rolando Seguelin. In the window there were clippings of the master with the shoes he had fashioned for presidents and pop stars. Expensive shops still frighten me — I couldn't bring myself to open the door.

The second store was more inviting, although I couldn't imagine wearing anything displayed in the window — purple shoes with fat ribbons, shoes in the shape of gondolas, and the Eiffel tower. I saw from a note on the wall that this shoemaker was a protégé of the great Rolando Seguelin. I could see her in the workshop in back, a nicely disheveled woman in her forties, sewing at a cobbler's bench. Her name was Giovanna Zanella. I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

That was when I noticed an object hanging on the wall — a piece of leather that looked like a bare human foot. It suggested a shoe, but it was unfinished. There was no mate, and the sole was missing.



“Excuse me,” I asked. “What is this?”

The cobbler put down her work and came out to the shop.

The object in the shape of a foot was a gift that had been given to her by her teacher and mentor, Rolando Seguelin. Seguelin had made it to illustrate the point that a shoe can be made into anything — that it is a piece of sculpture before it is a shoe.

“Is it for sale?” She looked at me, aghast.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I could never sell that. Rolando made it for me.”

Why exactly something moves you is a mystery. Was it because of my father, because of my misshapen feet, because of my barefoot youth, because it is perfectly unfinished, because nobody makes anything anymore, because there is hardly anything that is not for sale? If you look at it, you will see for yourself. It represented something beautiful beyond words. I never got it out of my head, and five years later when we returned to Venice, I spent hours walking in circles, turning down blind alleys, trying to find the barefoot shoe again.

If you have ever been to Venice, you know how hard it is to find the same place twice. When I finally found the shop, the owner wasn't there. I returned the next day. Ms. Zanella did not remember me. I told her that I had been there five years earlier, and couldn't forget the shoe, and had she changed her mind?

I explained that my father is a sculptor, and that I couldn't shake Rolando's shoe out of my imagination, and that I had come back to see it again. She looked at me silently, as though she hadn't seen me standing there before.

She had never considered selling the shoe, she said, but perhaps she would reconsider. Maybe I could write Rolando a letter and explain why I had come. If he would grant his permission, she said, she would consider entrusting me with the shoe.

That night I wrote a letter to Rolando, explaining why I loved the shoe, and how far I had come to ask.

Before we left town, I went back to Giovanna Zanella's shop. Rolando had agreed. She packed it up lovingly in a shoe box, nested it in tissue paper, and accepted my credit card. I paid \$400 for it — the most I ever paid for a pair of shoes, only it was not a pair, and couldn't be worn. My shoe museum was born.

When we went through customs in Rome the customs agent unwrapped the package.

"What is this?" he asked. "It's a shoe."

"Why is there only one? Why is it shaped like a foot? Why doesn't it have a sole?"

"It's a long story," I said. "Hard to explain."



A digression: By weird happenstance, I found myself a few years ago at an event for a homeless shelter in Princeton. During the silent auction, I won the chance to have Sally Singer, then the Fashion Editor of Vogue, visit my home and "edit" my closet. It wasn't until she was nearly at my door that I realized what my closet would look like to a person such as Sally Singer. I had been thrift shopping my whole life. I was the mother of three children still in grade school, and whatever vanity I possessed had surrendered to my life. I greeted Sally at the door, and suggested that maybe there was nothing worth editing upstairs, and would she mind just telling me what a stylish French woman would put in her closet, if her house had burned down, and she had to start over again?

It turns out that the lowly shoe lies at the heart of any notion of stylishness. If you want to be a fashionable person, Sally told me, you need to invest in shoes the way people once invested in real estate. What kind of shoe would she see me in, I asked. I didn't tell her about my orthopedic life, or the foot braces and saddle shoes. She opened her computer and searched for a pair of black Martin Margiella boots with four-inch heels. The boots looked strangely misshapen with an exaggerated high instep, as though constructed for an elderly person going to a ball.



Since then, I have become a slightly more stylish person with a few expensive pairs of beautiful shoes that I am still a little bit afraid to wear.

A further digression: When I was 20 years old a former boyfriend of mine was murdered by an elderly man who lived in his building and began shooting out his window at his neighbors who were parking in front of the building in a space he regarded as his own. My friend Mark, considering himself a friend of the old man, and imagining that he could reason with him, knocked on his door and went in to persuade him to put down his gun. The man shot Mark at point-blank range, and then held off the police for 18 hours, while Mark's mother waited upstairs for him to return. They had been celebrating his 23rd birthday and had just lit the candles on his cake when Mark heard the shooting and went downstairs. Mark, too, believed in the goodness of others, and the goodness of Mr. Hufnagle, only on this occasion he was wrong.

Only as I write these words, I also believe in the goodness of Mr. Hufnagle. I find myself 45 years later, still arguing with Mr. Hufnagle, and believing that he merely misunderstood something, and perhaps I could persuade him of this fact, and Mark could come back upstairs.

Only Mark actually died on his 23rd birthday, and his mother was removed from the building on a ladder by a SWAT team, and this is a sadness in the world that can't be fixed. Many years later I became involved in gun control advocacy and by a strange turn of events I met a woman who had thousands of pairs of shoes from the families of shooting victims. She asked the families to write the stories of their loved ones, and laminated the stories and attached them to the shoes, and created a traveling exhibit of the empty shoes, which she called the Silent March.

I invited her to bring it to our Quaker meeting, and I helped her lay out a Silent March of shoes. There were the shoes, with the people missing. You could almost see all the people standing there.

Later it developed that she had no place to store the collection. We lived then in rural Pennsylvania on a farm that came with a 15,000-square-foot hay barn, no longer in use. Despite my husband's hatred of clutter, we agreed to store the enormous cache of shoes. Fifty thousand people were dying of gun deaths annually when we started this project, a little Vietnam every year. The boxes were caving in on themselves from weight. Every so often I would look in, and sometimes I would see a particularly nice pair of shoes, maybe Manolo Blahniks or something especially fetching, and I would think — geez, they are just sitting here not being worn, who would ever know?

But of course, I put them back in the box.



After about fifteen years of storing them, the woman who started the organization had moved on to other things, and she told us to recycle them. And I felt I had done something more to the point for Mark by naming our daughter Kearney Greenleaf McDonnell in part after Mark Greenleaf Johnson, as she was born about one hour shy of his birthday. Her middle name is a pretty fabulous living monument to his goodness. The shoes were ready to move along.

To truly recycle them I would have had to cut the stories off of each pair of shoes and take them to the Salvation Army.

This I could not do. Every pair of shoes belonged to its story. To sever them seemed like another kind of violence to the families who had lovingly attached them with ribbon and twine. So we just rented a dumpster, and pitched the boxes in, one after another, until the dumpster was filled. It was a beautiful shoe museum, but it wasn't the shoe museum I was meant to own. The earth reclaimed them, as the tide took back my sandflat museum of shells. They told the saddest of all human stories, but that is only part of the story. I wanted my shoe museum to have wedding shoes and wooden shoes and mukluks and moccasins.

Since the discovery of the Venetian shoe, I have begun hunting in the vast thrift store of the world for shoes that are beautiful and worthy of a shoe museum.

I love shoes, I suppose, because it is such a rare thing for a shoe to be beautiful. This by itself is a metaphor for something. Cartier Bresson once said about the human face that, "After a certain age, you got the face you deserve." A real shoe that has been worn expresses something about where it has been and how it has been battered into being. Mostly they don't survive, and when they do, they are not beautiful.

A shoe covers one of the arguably least attractive aspects of the human body. And then it is dragged around, stepped on, pummeled, and ground back into particles. Shoes are where I first formed the notion of my own un-gainliness and need for correction, something I imagined set me apart in a kind of permanent loneliness but which I now recognize as the great common human thing.



Once I started looking for beautiful old shoes, I noticed that there are really only three categories of shoe that survive in abundance — children's shoes (the owners outgrew them before the shoes could be destroyed, so in a sense they are abandoned before they can be destroyed), wedding shoes (they are worn only once) and doll shoes, which are never worn by anyone. The vast majority of shoes wear themselves back into atoms in the line of duty. The rules of treasure hunting are as follows — it isn't treasure if it is easy to find.

