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The Trouble with Horseshoes

Rebecca Tarbell

St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I had to have those shoes. Every morning I saw them in the window as I walked to school, and every morning they sparkled and winked at me. They sat there shining on their shimmering white silk bed right between the rhinestone tiara and the coordinating bag with rhinestone trim. The bag and tiara I could survive without, but I had to have those shoes."

Cover Page Footnote
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J&A Grocery

Bottle of Boone's, brown bag please,
Chicken toes, turkey necks, pickled knees.
Smiling faces and specialty meats,
Always something cooking down on Reynolds Street.

Jack's bright smile, laughing sounds,
Tuesday's special: Dollar ninety-nine a pound.
Third party checks, great place to meet,
Always something cooking down on Reynolds Street.

Food stamps in front, smokes in rear,
Pork rinds, chitlins, lard fried ears.
News of the day, escaping heat,
Always something cooking down on Reynolds Street.

--Jay Moore

The Trouble with Horseshoes

I had to have those shoes. Every morning I saw them in the window as I walked to school, and every morning they sparkled and winked at me. They sat there shining on their shimmering white silk bed right between the rhinestone tiara and the coordinating bag with rhinestone trim. The bag and tiara I could survive without, but I had to have those shoes.

I saw them in the shop window every morning as I walked to school, and I would daydream about wearing them the entire way to school, all through homeroom, and partway through the first period. At just about the same time each morning, during Mr. Borick's history lesson, I would begin to scheme a way to be able to afford those shoes by the time the Annual Autumn Harvest Dance rolled around.

Sometimes—usually during the really boring lectures—my fantasies included gunning down the front window of the store, SWAT team style, and making off with the shoes in a black helicopter. Usually, though, I envisioned myself delivering papers every morning for the next two months or getting a job as a grocery store clerk for awhile. No matter how hard or how long I worked, though, I knew that I still would never by able to save up enough in time to buy those shoes.

I couldn't ask my mother for the money. She thought it was foolish to spend money on clothes that weren't sensible. "Shoes ought to be sturdy and last at least three years, or till your toes pop out the ends," she would remind me every time we went to Woolworth's or Ames to buy new clothes for school. That's why I still wore the same black patent leather Mary Janes to church every Sunday that Mama had bought for me when I graduated six grade. That's also why I was wearing my sister's old prom dress to the Autumn Harvest Dance. Actually, Katy's old prom dress was Mama's old wedding dress that she had shortened and dyed royal blue for Katy's prom. This year Mama dyed the dress black. She took off the puffy sleeves and put spaghetti straps on instead. She told me I had to wear a shawl though, because the spaghetti straps were too sexy for a girl of fourteen. I didn't mind, because I knew that I'd take off the shawl when I got to the dance anyway.

Whether I wore a shawl or no shawl, spaghetti straps or puffy sleeves, what I wanted to wear most with that dress was those shoes. They were shiny black satin with high heels—which I had never worn—and they had an ankle strap with a little buckle that was a
horseshoe of rhinestones. Every day after school, I walked dejectedly past the shop and glanced up at the tiny horseshoe buckle winking happily at me. Every day I just looked back down at the cracks in the sidewalk and sighed, having already in my mind exhausted all the possibilities of getting those shoes.

Just past the shop was the corner store where I sometimes stopped to buy a candy bar or gumball to chew on while I did my homework. Wally owned the corner store. He was a tall man who looked like he had once been fat but wasn’t any more. Or maybe he had grown up somewhere where there was twice as much gravity so that it pulled all his skin down too much. He had great sagging checks and bags under his eyes. They didn’t make him look too old or tired, just softer. He always smiled and let me sit on the red barstool at the counter, and, sometimes, he gave me sugar cubes to suck on. Wally always asked how school was and asked about my homework, and he listened while I talked about algebra and Thomas Paine and iambic pentameter.

The day before the Autumn Harvest Dance, the skies were overcast and I daydreamed about creating a machine that would magically teleport the shoes through the shop window. That dreary, drizzly, afternoon, I stopped to buy a candy bar at Wally’s corner store.

“Hey there, short stuff,” he called as I pushed open the door and the bell on the handle jingled my arrival. Wally wore a blue short sleeved button-up shirt and a starched white apron. He was drying and polishing the ice cream soda glasses as I slid onto the stool. “How was school today?”

“O.K.,” I replied. I told Wally all about how Mr. Borick had rambled on and on about the Revolutionary War and then assigned a two page essay on the Boston Tea Party.

Wally laughed his great big rolling laugh and set the ice cream soda glass up on the top shelf next to the others. “Good luck on your essay, kiddo! Can I give you any food for thought?”

“I think I’d like a Milky Way today, please.” I reached into my pocket for the 50 cents that I had saved by not buying milk during lunch the past two days. I set the two quarters on the counter next to the candy bar that Wally had gotten from behind the counter. Wally punched the buttons on the cash register and the drawer popped open. He picked up the two quarters and dropped them into the drawer. “Thank you, kiddo. Good luck on your essay.”

His statement was punctuated by a deafening crash. We both jumped, then realized that the ice cream soda glass he had been polishing had slipped from its precarious perch on the shelf and shattered on the tile floor. “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” Wally muttered as he grabbed a broom from behind the counter to sweep up the shards of glass. I looked down at the mess and then noticed the cash register next to me still wide open. Wads of bills peeked up at me.

“Goodbye, Wally,” I called as I slipped off the stool. “Sorry about the glass!”

“See you later, kiddo,” I heard him call over his shoulder as the door jingled shut behind me. I skipped over the cracks in the sidewalk toward home with my hands jammed in my jacket pockets, one holding a Milky Way candy bar and the other filled with a wad of ten-dollar bills.

That night, I excitedly completed my Boston Tea Party essay then propped my desk chair against my bedroom door to prevent any intrusions. My jacket, hanging on the handle of the closet door, was begging me to expose what was in its pocket. I reached in and pulled out the ball of money, then carefully unfolded each bill and laid it on my bed. When I was done, seven wrinkled faces of Alexander Hamilton smiled back up at me. Six of them would cover the cost of the shoes, with tax, and the other, I decided, I would take to church next Sunday and slip into the offering plate when Mama wasn’t looking so that I wouldn’t get a guilty conscience.

The next day, I woke up excited. I skipped and floated through the day, feeling the bulge of ten-dollar bills in the front pocket on my corduroys. During Mr. Borick’s class, I daydreamed about boys like Brett Pantale and Dale Graham noticing my new shoes that night and asking me to dance. The final school bell rang and I ran to the shop and traded my six ten-dollar bills for the most beautiful shoes in the world.

That night, I zipped myself into the black dress, giddy with excitement. Mama even bought me a pair of black stockings and let me wear her mascara and light pink lipstick. Just before it was time to go, I strapped on my old black patent leather Mary Janes. Mama gave me a kiss on the cheek and told me that she would wait up for me. She wrapped the shawl around my shoulders and sent me on my way.

I breathed the damp night air in deep and, invigorated, skipped down the front walk to the mailbox. I reached inside the mailbox and pulled out a clear plastic bag. A little rhinestone horseshoe winked at me in the moonlight. I took those shoes out of the plastic bag and carefully stepped out of my Mary Janes and into the black satin heels. The Mary Janes which replaced the heels in the plastic bag, were deposited in the mailbox for the night, and were soon forgotten.
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as I started the three block walk to the school and my Cinderella’s Ball, the Autumn Harvest Dance.

Walking in high heels was a lot harder than I thought. I wobbled and teetered along the sidewalk. Trying to remember how I’d seen movie actresses walk, I threw my shoulders back, raised my chin, and swung my hips from side to side. I strode through the pool of light from a street lamp as if it were a spotlight. As I was passing Wally’s corner store, I flipped my hair over my shoulder and blew a kiss at the big plate glass window, as if hundreds of fans were watching my every move. But just as the kiss landed on an imaginary fan’s cheek, one of the heels caught in a crack in the sidewalk and sent me sprawling to the ground.

Little pebbles fell away from my hands as I brushed damp hair out of my face. I sat up and looked down at the mess my fantasy had made. A large hole ran up the right leg of my stockings from heel to knee. One of the spaghetti straps had popped off my dress and the loose end was dangling down my back. My right shoe was badly water-stained from the puddles I’d landed in. And the other shoe sat cock-eyed on the sidewalk, the heel broken off, the little horseshoe of rhinestones sparkling at me in the streetlight.

“Oh, stop it already!” I yelled at the shoe. “Stop looking so damn beautiful and pretty and...” I pulled the shawl tighter around my shoulders and began to cry. I sat there sobbing on the sidewalk as the rest of the kids danced and laughed at the school. I sat on the sidewalk alone as girls complimented each other on their dresses. I sat there crying as boys dared each other to ask the girls to dance. And I sat there, drying my tears as the couples who’d found each other during the night held on tightly during the last song, knowing that it would soon be over.

Finally, I stood up and wiped the mascara streaks from my face. The fans were gone from Wally’s store window; even the one who’d caught the kiss hadn’t bothered to stay around. Something glimmered briefly, and I stepped closer to see what it was. But all that was there were the ice cream soda glasses, lined up carefully on the top shelf behind the counter. I picked up my broken shoe, and began to hobble crookedly home.

--Rebecca Tarbell

--Jennifer Alise Lydum

I GREEN for you,
it’s as light as a feather.
as fragile as my heart;
but to you it’s GREEN.
it gives you what
you think you need.

it’s true you do...
but if I painted myself,
a lovely shade of green—
would you love me?
would you cash me in?

I GREEN for you,
and would green for you
forever and ever;
but wake up...I’m
$$spent.

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