



Literary Juice

An Online Literary Magazine

Shoes

By LYNN L. SLOAN

ALVINA LEDBEITER needed a new pair of shoes. Not that anyone would see them in her—she still had a few occasions where she wanted to look sharp before she laid her head on a pillow, for all Eternity. Duke Crocker's ninety-third birthday for starters where she intended to outshine the widow-ladies who believed he had one more wedding in him. Alvina might be a widow-lady, she was no such fool.

"Always dress your best when going shopping or to the emergency room," as Momma used to say. Alvina donned her smart, navy suit and her only black heels that were just about shot, then her white hair, fluffing that patch right at the back that her neglectful friends usually missecc women had to be so careful-and put on her face. Without a dab of Fire & Ice she almost disappeared.

Halloran's smelled to high heaven of perfume. Waving off the ghouls with perfume spritzers, she made her way to Shoes, which was as pretty as she remembered, all beige and soft lights and elegant women drifting among spotlight islands and dark-suited clerks bearing shoeboxes. She walked past the displays of glorious high heels to the back corner where on a glass shelf sat the sensible black shoes with two-inch heels. The wallflowers. It had come to this. She picked up one with a gold buckle that proclaimed, "I may be dull, but I'm expensive and Italian," and looked around for a sales clerk. All were as busy as chipmunks, except for those two fat girls. Surely Halloran's hadn't hired girls too fat to bend over as shoe clerks? She carried the Italian number to the lane the clerks took to the storeroom, and waited.

"Sir?" "I'll be right back." "Sir?" "I'm with a customer." "Can you help—" "I'll send someone over." "Excuse me—" "I'm busy." "Can you get this for me in a size" The last one didn't. The last one didn't even pause. Halloran's had certainly gone to the dogs.

She surveyed the room. By the entrance, a young woman appeared—well, they were all young compared to Alvina. This one had wavy blonde hair just like the weather girl on Channel 7 and the kind of tan that came in a bottle. A hush fell over Shoes as she wafted over to the designer display.

Behind Alvina came a whoosh, a clerk hurrying from the back.

"I would like to try—" Alvina said, but the little man raced toward the girl. Other salesmen—where did they come from?—converged on the blonde, but the clerk who'd almost knocked Alvina down got there first. "May I help you?" he breathed.

The others turned away, defeated. One of the disappointed strolled by Alvina and she asked if he might help her. "Going on break." The others vanished or returned to the customers they'd abandoned. Across the expanse of luxe, beige carpet, the Weathergirl handed a silver sandal to the unpleasant little man. He bowed, an honest-to-goodness bow. Alvina let her disgust register on her face when he tried to bypass her on his way into the storeroom. She jutted out her arm and clipped him with the shoe.

"Size 6."

Without a word, he took the shoe and turned away. Within the tangle of dyed hair at the back of his head she saw a shiny black patch, like patent leather. He must have painted his bald spot. Who did he think he was fooling? Sharpie pens left an iridescent sheen. She looked down and saw the telltale pinky-purple streaks where she'd touched up her shoes. Embarrassed, she glanced up hoping no one had noticed. Every pair of eyes was admiring the Weathergirl as she settled in a plush chair. The very air sighed as if Loveliness herself had alighted in Halloran's shoe department.

"Size 6. "

The vain little man thrust a shoebox at Alvina, then adjusted the remaining boxes and scurried to the Weathergirl, where he knelt and spread out his offerings around her feet, the little toady.

Churning with annoyance and humiliation, Alvina found a bench and sat. Surely one of the clerks would jump, seeing that she was a good bet to buy something. Surely they worked on commission. But no one paid her a speck of attention, not even those two fat girls. She stared at them, then at the pimply fellow straightening the ankle boots, who rushed toward a newcomer laden with shopping bags. All the other clerks kneeled and opened boxes and hurried to the storeroom and back. She could wait until Kingdom come. No one was going to slip off her worn-out pumps with the pinky-purple streaks and guide her feet into the expensive Italian pair in the box on her lap. She sighed and opened the lid, slipped on one, it fit, then the other. They practically kissed her feet. She strolled to a mirror—her ankles looked no worse than Queen Elizabeth's—then walked toward the bent-over toady, and said, "When you have a moment...."

He adjusted his position to block her, and the Weathergirl didn't lift her gaze from the mile-high sandals lashed to her perfect ankles. Alvina might just as well be invisible.

"When you're free, if you could...."

He shifted again, making a show of ignoring her.

Alvina glared at his back. She should say, "Is that Sharpie ink on your bald spot?" Instead she retreated to where her old pumps leaned dejectedly next to the empty shoebox. She had half a mind to walk out. She looked down at her doughy feet in the boring but Italian shoes. The buckles flashed gold at her, just like winking. Alvina smiled, sat, nestled her old pumps in the folds of tissue, and tapped the lid in place.

As she passed the fat girls, she waved to the closed box she'd left on the seat.

"They weren't right for me."

Neither looked at her feet.

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