

Red Shoes
by
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I have always had an issue with my feet. Not that I have two left ones. Not that their clubbed, or flat, or pigeon-toed, or even hairy. No, they're just big. That's right. Big feet was my issue. Perhaps it would not have been if I'd lived and grown up in the States, where my feet would have been considered of average size. But I grew up in Mexico where a size 6 was considered a freak show at a circus.

And I'm a 9 ½... And have been since I was 11 years old.

So I had to buy my shoes in the boys department...

I'm not sure when you ladies last shopped for your shoes in the men's department, but they don't have a very extensive line of pretty, dainty shoes.

And so everything that ever went wrong in my life, I blamed on my big feet. As if size alone wasn't enough of a torment, my mother would only buy me shoes that either tied or buckled. Like torture tools from the Inquisition. No suave, sophisticated slip on pumps or loafers for me, no Sirree! I wore some real clunkers.

But I was 10 going on 21, and I'd made up my mind that I was going to get me a pair of them thar loafers. I'd seen what they called "penny loafers" on some of the girls at school, and as soon as I laid eyes on them, I knew two things: mom would NEVER let me get them, and I was going to get them anyway.

I'll skip the boring part about how I wore my mother down to a shadow of her former self. When you have a dream, anything is possible. "No" is not an option. Against her better judgment, her admonitions, and dire warnings, we went to an honest-to-goodness girls shoe store during a shopping trip to the States.

I made a b-line to the loafers and pointed to the pair I wanted. Which of course, they didn't have in my size... The shoe salesperson, hoping to forestall a torrent of tears, pointed to another pair I hadn't noticed before. They were almost identical, but they were red. A deep, luxurious, traffic light red. And they were going to be mine. I think mom had a mini-stroke while paying for them, but she didn't say a word. She even donated the two bright copper pennies for my shoes. Copper and red, now THERE'S a combination.

Now, you'd think someone who was as self-conscious about my feet as I was, would do anything to minimize them. Not advertise them. But oddly enough, I was in 7th heaven. I drew envious spectators and admirers from every grade. I may have even slept in them. And I was definitely taking them on our family's upcoming trip to the tiny town where we had first moved in Mexico.

The family we visited there was one of the wealthiest in the region, and certainly the wealthiest in the 1,500 person town. They had a huge, air-conditioned house, and enormous grounds with a little brook snaking through the little forest amidst their acreage.

At this point I should probably mention my brother Robert. He is two years younger, and simply adored me, much to my consternation. He was literally my shadow, and went absolutely everywhere I did. Which was hardly ever useful.

So, we were visiting with these people who have two children who are slightly older than the two of us, and the four of us were sent out to play together. It was awkward. They were rich, I had red loafers, what can I say.

I stomped through their little forest in my two-week-old red shoes, and they took us to their favorite place in the woods by the brook. In the middle of the stream was a very large, sawed-off stump. And hanging over the bank where we stood was a very long, gnarled vine. The boy grabbed onto it, took a couple of steps back, and flung himself out over the water, gracefully skimming it and, performing what to my eyes was a double back layout in pike position, landing squarely on the stump. The return swing was just as graceful and impressive and adorned with an enormous, show-off grin. I half expected a Tarzan yodel. After landing ashore he extended the vine to me.

I felt suddenly flooded with shyness and fear, and muttered something about being too fatigued from the trip. Robert just hid behind me. So the sister took her turn on the vine and her trip to and from the stump was just as graceful. Robert and I just watched, quite cowed I might add, as these two siblings had a grand old time swinging back and forth. But I had my red shoes.

Someone from the house shouted their names and they excused themselves, running back inside. I looked at Robert. Then I looked at the vine. Then I looked all around. And then I looked at the vine. And I grabbed it.

And Robert turned white.

And I grinned, and took several steps back in my red shoes.

And Robert's lower lip started to quiver.

And then, before I could regret anything, I jumped up onto the vine and flung myself and my red shoes into the void...and the world turned into slow motion.

The little brook had somehow become the Mississippi. The enormous stub now appeared to be the size of a penny. And as my brother's little figure and the shore he was fidgeting on became microscopic, I had a stomach churning realization: I hadn't pushed off quite hard enough to make it to the trunk.

My eyes as big as platters, I gripped the vine with my scrawny 10-year-old arms, and extended one of my really big feet clad in a really red loafer, out as far as I could, trying to gain purchase of the trunk. But I only tagged the trunk. Not even enough to push off from it. That's when I had the second stomach churning realization: I didn't have enough momentum to make it back to the shore.

Where Robert was now crying.

I willed myself to swing harder, balled myself up, and probably should have launched myself off the vine onto the shore. But I didn't. Instead, I extended my really big foot out to touch the ground, but for the first time in my life, it wasn't big enough...

Robert yelped.

It was now just a matter of physics before the vine, with me dangling on it, would stop swinging. And I would be hanging over the middle of the stream. With my red shoes. At that moment I didn't care what Robert was doing, because I was wondering how long I could hang there, and keep my red shoes dry.

Not very long at all. Though it felt like hours, it was probably no more than just a few seconds, and my little 10-year-old grip, and my little 10-year-old biceps finally just gave up, and I slid ever so slowly, into the cold water, red loafers first.

My first thought was, of course, my red loafers. Followed very quickly by, how deep is this water?

Fortunately, after sliding into it up to my chest, I touched down on what felt like a very large, flat stone. The water was clear, and I could not only see that there were no piranhas, I had a perfect view of my red, water-soaked, loafers.

Gripping the vine for dear life, I somehow succeeded in turning to face the shore, where Robert was now running back and forth, bawling.

Somehow, I was eventually dragged, unceremoniously, from the water. I supposed Robert's carrying on finally caught some adult's attention.

As we walked back to the house, I could feel the water oozing around my toes, and with each step I could hear my loafers going squish, squish, squish. Robert sniffed and whimpered. And the adults snickered all the way. Laughing I was sure, at my really big feet.