

Red High Heels

Amy felt the bills in her pocket. Over and over she felt them, fingers with chewed-off nails, painted bright red once but just splotches of color left now, fumbling in the recesses of her blue jean cut-offs. They weren't crisp straight bills like she had seen Harold get from the bank, so new that they stuck together and he had to count them carefully, wetting his fingers with his tongue. These were crumpled and worn with dog-eared corners; one was even missing a corner, torn-off. And they were dirty; almost too dirty to touch, imagining all the hands that had held them: greasy mechanics' hands; infected hospital workers' hands; contaminated hands; boogery hands. But it was still money, thirty dollars in all, thrown into a faraway hat; enough to buy the red patent leather pumps with ankle wraps in the window at Morgensen's.

They'd been there for a year, perched fashionably on the display pedestal below the smartly dressed mannequin, matched with the various seasonal outfits: a pink chiffon summer dress when they first appeared; a playful denim wrap in the fall; a short black lace dress in the winter. The red high heels were the siren call of each outfit, insatiable desire masquerading as sophistication. It was too much for the good people of Midland who had been conditioned by the pulpit to avert their eyes from such displays. And so they sat through the seasons, and with each new outfit their price declined. During the whirlwind affair with the pink chiffon, their passion fresh and indomitable, the red pumps were boldly priced at one hundred and

twenty dollars. In the late summer one grasps at fleeting pleasures; the price dropped to ninety dollars. By the time the pumpkins were ripe and one's attention turned inward they were giving themselves away at sixty dollars. Still they sat there through the winter, unloved, pink chiffon a wistful memory, until the local farmers disked the fields and planted their seed deep within the earth, when they were placed in the discount display, unworthy of any suitor, chiffon or denim or lace: everything half price.

Through each season she had gone to stand outside the show window at Mortensen's and dream of the day when she could wear such shoes. They were, to her, a proclamation of the power of womanhood, and oh how she ached to be in its full possession, to dress like the mannequin in the window and sashay down the streets of Midland so that everyone would know how magnificent she was. But the red shoes were for her just a dream, far beyond the reach of her meager allowance. She begged her stepfather to let her work the fields this summer; she was old enough, she insisted. Bobby Thayer had been picking beans for two years now, and she could do anything he could do. Everyone knew that. The fields were no place for a girl, she was told. Enjoy being a child while you can, her mother had said. But that was just it: she wasn't a child anymore. Not really.

She could feel her womanhood growing within her. It had been a year since her mother, seeing for the first time her budding breasts silhouetted in the evening sun at the church picnic, had rushed her home, then taken her to Mortensen's the next day where she was fitted with her first bra and a lecture on modesty. Once in a while she noticed that the boys would look at her in a way they never had

before; sometimes even men. When they did, she felt as if life had delivered to her a gift that carried her beyond the limits of her known world. It was as if she held within her being some captivating mystery, irresistible and inexhaustible, ever present in its promise.

But mostly she didn't think about it at all. During the school year she was busy with homework and household chores. Each morning she fed the dogs and chickens, collecting eggs from the straw-lined nesting boxes. She played basketball and soccer, accumulating scabs on her elbows and knees like trophies. In the afternoon, after the vacuuming and dusting were done, if the weather was fair and she could convince her mother that she had finished her school work, she would ride her bicycle the half mile into town to meet up with one of her schoolmates. They polished their nails and practiced putting on the lipstick they had sneaked from their mothers' bathroom drawer, hidden behind the friend's bedroom door, preening and giggling as they discussed the attributes of the boys of the town. Other days they would walk along the sidewalks, hopeful of some unexpected adventure, until the fading light of evening left them resigned to the tedium of their lives, constricted as they were by the smallness of the place into which fate had dropped them.

On weekends she spent more time in town, sleeping over with Grace or Bethany, neither of whom ever spent the night with her, the farm not being half as exciting as the town where anything might happen at any moment (but never did). In the summer, after an afternoon of swimming in the city pool, she and her friends would often perch themselves in an oak tree in the park across from city hall. She could climb higher than anyone, even Bobby Thayer who

wasn't afraid of anything. She would sit on the highest branch and look out across the rooftops and the fields of beans and peas and corn to the blue ridges of the mountains. She pretended that she could see all the way to Boise where there were twenty-four movie theaters all in one building and McDonalds and a shopping mall and streets with more cars on them than she could count filled with all sorts of people that wouldn't be caught dead in a town like Midland, people with lives that were exciting beyond imagination. She'd pretend that she was the captain of a ship, high in the masthead, sailing across the flatland to adventure.

She would sit up there for hours. Her friends would beg her to come down, afraid that she would fall, before wandering off, leaving her alone, an unseen presence high in the foliage. Sometimes, when the summer evenings wrapped around her like a quilt, the warm breeze touching her skin and the sound of crickets caressing the gentle fall of darkness, just before she climbed down, she would pretend that she could see all the way to Seattle. She could see herself there, on the swing on her father's front porch, her hand wrapped in his as they sat quietly looking out over the city to the bay full of ships headed to exotic locales: China, Malaysia, Ceylon. They would sit there holding hands, silently watching the procession until the vessels were nothing more than sparkles gliding through the dark while moths fluttered at the light.

She had only met him once, the summer after her sixth grade year, when he travelled to Midland to take her camping. Her mother was embarrassed having him show up in the town. She said he was her one big mistake. It had happened right after high school when she

and Vernelle Roehner had left for cosmetology school in Seattle. One afternoon she and Vernelle were walking down Broadway Avenue, it was all so exciting to them, so glamorous, when they came upon a crowd of people. She jostled to the front to see three mimes performing a skit. One of them was Dylan. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. Dressed only in white cloth pants tied with a drawstring, his chiseled chest and sinewy arms moved with an eerie precision. The rouge and mascara he wore highlighted the arresting beauty of his eyes and face. His lithe body flowed more than moved, there in the afternoon light filtered through the Flame Ash trees, a powerful dancer in slow motion, a moving picture one frame at a time, the audience an arm length away breathlessly anticipating each movement. She could not control her heart; beating stronger than it ever had, it flowed out across the cracked squares of the pavement and immersed itself into his smallest motions, wrapped itself around his tendons and tissue, melded with the potency of his flesh. The movement ceased, the crowd dispersed, but she remained, fixated on him as if in a trance, unable to look away.

She remained that way for over a year, giving all of herself to him, unable to withhold the least part. But when the baby came she needed something more than the dream like state in which Dylan existed: a place of their own, a crib, some assurance for tomorrow was all she had wanted. It was more than Dylan could give. A bus ticket came in the mail. Her parents met her at the depot in Boise; she and Amy moved back into the room of her childhood. Never again did Amy's mother look beyond the stark fields of Midland. Her father arranged a job bookkeeping for the irrigation district; she sang in the church

choir. Two years later she married Harold Stempel, the youth pastor at the church. He was tall and gawky with dark unruly hair, an enormous Adam's apple and a long skinny nose that his thick glasses slid down. His family grew sugar beets and potatoes on three hundred twenty acres north of town; they were diligent in their tithing.

The enormously long convertible pulled into the yard. It looked like a throw back to the thirties when cars were all long sleek hoods curved over restless wheels. It was a moveable surrealist painting, its pastel blue background filled with squiggles and flowers of red and yellow and green with ominous black eyes staring from every angle. Harold met Dylan in the yard, hands filled with Amy's rucksack and sleeping bag so that the greeting was awkward, a half handshake through the straps of the bag, no invitation to the kitchen and lemonade. Harold stood a head taller than Dylan, his Adam's apple bobbing as he nervously filled the silence with banalities, anxious to have the intruder on his way. Amy stood sheepishly quiet at Harold's side, staring intently at the figure before her.

While Harold jabbered haltingly and stared into the distance, his eyes flitting everywhere to avoid his listener's eyes, Dylan's calm dark eyes never wavered from Harold's (except once to greet Amy with a warm crinkle and wink) as he listened intently to the nervous chatter. He made no extraneous movements; his hands rested naturally at his sides. His tanned feet wore leather sandals. A white cotton peasant shirt flowed over beige linen pants held with a drawstring. Dylan was more exotic than anyone she had ever seen. He wore his long dishwater blonde hair in dreadlocks and large gold hoops hung from

each ear. The nail on the little finger of his right hand was grown out long and painted bright red.

In that moment, looking at her two fathers, Amy came to know herself. She saw what she was and what she had been trained to be. She saw the naturalness of herself, resolutely springing from the earth, struggling against the tilling of rows. As they drove off Amy looked back at the two story framed house, the clapboard siding painted in various shades of brown, and saw her mother standing at the upstairs window, an apron over her simple frock, her hands clutching a dishcloth.

Dylan drove Amy north toward Sun Valley, the two of them riding quietly at first, Amy not knowing what to say, Dylan waiting for her to say it. He told her he had friends with a cabin next to a mountain lake that they could stay in. They drove past the fields of corn and sugar beets and peas, their hair flowing in the breeze of the convertible, toward the steep sage brush shoulders of the mountains, folded in shades of jade and gold by the sunlight and shadow of the puffy blue sky. Amy sat quietly, stirred by the adventure: riding with a new father, a stranger who held some part of herself, toward the glamorous resort town mentioned occasionally around the kitchen table.

Driving swiftly, Dylan put a CD in the stereo. His fingers began drumming to the beat of hard pulsing music, his head shaking and bobbing intently, almost frighteningly; then his easy free smile gleaming below dark glasses, nodding to Amy in a gesture that she couldn't resist. Soon, without talking, they bobbed and swayed to the same primal beat, the farm houses and fields screaming by.

They stopped for lunch in a sidewalk café in Ketchum where they ate Thai melon soup and green curry chicken while a menagerie of people streamed by. There were families dressed in Bermuda shorts and Gucci loafers; gaggles of girls in embroidered jeans with frayed cotton threads framing carefully placed holes in the knees and pockets; middle-aged women in long flowing skirts and wide-brimmed hats who carried themselves like royalty; there were even men who looked like Dylan with long hair and sandals, shirts open to the waist. Amy took it all in, marveling at how different the world could become in the space of an afternoon. It was as if she had been transported to an alternate reality that Dylan carried with him. It was a world that she suddenly recognized, she had always known was within her, just as it was within Dylan. It was the part of her that she couldn't share with anyone, not even with Bethany when in the dark, sleeping in the same bed on a summer night, they told each other their deepest secrets. She hadn't even shared it with herself until now, but she saw that it had always been there.

“What kind of music do you listen to?” he asked her.

“I don't know. Whatever's on the radio, I guess.”

“Do you mind if I call you Amelie?”

“I guess, if you want.”

“That's what we named you, you know, your mother and I, after an American princess and writer.”

Amy looked at him for a long time.

“No, I'm just Amy.” It was one too many visions of her new self for one afternoon.

“Then Amy it is.” What do you say we have some fun, Amy?

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“We can pay the piper, too. What do you say?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll show you. Wait right here.”

Dylan dashed back to the car and returned with a small suitcase.

“Every actor needs some props,” he said, winking at Amy, “and a little greasepaint.”

Dylan applied foundation and makeup to her for a few minutes, then held the mirror for her to see. The features of her face were greatly exaggerated: big ruby lips against the whitened skin of her face, dark blue eyelids and long black lashes drooping under heavy arched brows; she looked like a caricature of some glamorous figure of a bygone era.

“Do I have to look like this?” Amy pleaded.

“It’s theater, Baby. The audience needs to see your features. Just give it a try. Here, put this on.”

He handed her an old-fashioned gown, then applied his makeup. He wore a loose dark jacket over his linen pants and a beret over his long braided hair.

“Now, whenever I put my arms out and drop to one knee, cross your arms and turn away from me. You’ll get the feel of what we’re doing, so just go with it. O.K.?”

“O.K.”

They moved out toward the sidewalk and then Dylan stopped, his arms mechanically held in front of him, his head cocked to one side, face frozen in a captivating smile. Amy stopped next to him, not knowing what to do. As the passersby approached Dylan shifted his

pose, engaging them momentarily. There was an aura of grace and power about him. Within minutes a small crowd had formed on the walk and he began his performance. He started to move around Amy, flowing about the edges of her, lifting a leg in slow motion so that it was fully extended above his head, then bringing it down, smoothly and forcefully wrapping her waist in its sinews. He preened about her like a matador, his lithe movement irresistible. Then, arching his back and raising his arms high, his eyes assertively fixed on hers as if preparing for victory, he lunged forward dropping to one knee and opened his arms. Amy, feeling the thrill of the crowd's attention, huffily crossed her arms and turned away from him. Dylan cocked his head toward the crowd in a comedic pleading way and a ripple of laughter flowed among them.

The crowd thickened until Dylan and Amy performed within a hushed circle of souls. Dylan rose as a debonair playboy, slowly gliding around Amy in a self assured manner, his persona totally transformed; again he was rejected and sought the sympathy of the crowd. He became a college professor seducing his student, a businessman dominating his secretary, and each time he was rejected. Then, moving with the graceful strength of a dancer he became a young man filled with the joy of love. He tore off his coat and the beret, his open shirt revealing the rippling sinews of his torso, and exploded into a series of entrechats and grande cabrioles. Then, spinning in a fouetté, he finished by dropping to one knee in front of Amy with his arms outstretched. She began to turn away, but this time he caught her hand in his. Soon they were engaged in a pas de deux, Dylan moving with seductive power around Amy, then, holding

her by the waist, lifting her gracefully, finally spinning her in a pirouette. He finished with a présage, holding Amy (who did her best to look like a dancer with her arms outstretched, toes and fingers gracefully pointed) high over his head before dropping dramatically to one knee with Amy resting in his embrace.

A cheer sprang up from the crowd and coins and bills flew into the case left open on the sidewalk, as Dylan and Amy took their bows.

“Well, how do you like show biz?” Dylan asked her as they counted the money.

Amy just looked at him, her eyes big and wide, dimples full in her cheeks, hands clutching the gown. Her lips started to move, then her head stirred sideways and her eyes opened even wider. She began to twirl and dance, still holding the dress at her sides before throwing her arms out wide as she whirled on the walk, her head thrown back, laughing at the sky.

They shopped for groceries before heading north along the course of asphalt through the meadows where the river wound its cottonwoods and willows, below the fir and pine covered mountains. Dylan told her about his friend, a painter he had known when they were both students. They were on the street together performing for coins and bills thrown in a hat, Dylan dancing and doing mime, his friend creating elaborate impressionist scenes on the sidewalk with crayons and chalk. They were antiestablishmentarians: they believed that all institutions, even those controlling the arts, become corrupt. They were dedicated to bringing their art directly to the people as a free expression of the human spirit, untarnished by institutional influence.

“But life brings challenges that test us all, obstacles that can temper us until we are as hardened and pure as Excaliber. More often it wears us down; life tempts us with the comforts and rewards that ego demands. We start compromising here and there. At first it is just small things: changing the movement of a dance to suit a patron; painting in the style of the moment to get a gallery showing; altering the premise of a story to get it published. It doesn't seem like much at the time, a small sacrifice to advance one's career. The result is always the same: Self is abandoned for Ego. We find ourselves going through the motions, trying to please an audience we can only imagine, judging ourselves by our resumés. We abandon Self, leave it to wither and decay, and build our lives around the temple of Ego, which can never be satiated. It always demands more, bigger, better. When we abandon Self for Ego we doom ourselves to an endless chase; we can never be fulfilled. We are all born infinite; it is Ego that limits us.”

They climbed the heights of Galena Pass silently, Dylan contemplating the words he had spoken, Amy not knowing what they meant, but thinking that her dad must be the wisest man she had ever known. Cresting the summit they broke through the quilting fog into bright sunlight. The broad valley of meadows and pines lay below them, stretching to a horizon of razored snow-capped peaks thrusting proudly into the sky, the dancer reaching for the heavens.

“So what about your friend?” Amy asked.

“What friend?”

“The one who's cabin we're staying at.”

“Oh, him. Well, he became so successful that he stopped performing on the streets. Now he has exhibitions all over the world

and his paintings, produced by apprentices working under his direction, sell for fifty, a hundred thousand dollars a pop. He has homes in Seattle, New York and Tuscany. And this cabin in Idaho. He says he hasn't been here in three years. Funny, though: he's still known as "The Street Artist".

"So, you're still friends?"

"Not really. We see each other once a year or so. It allows him to believe that he's one of us, that he really is "The Street Artist." Anyway, he loaned me his car and his cabin for a few days, so I can't complain."

"This isn't your car?"

"No. This car's a little out there, don't you think? It's all ego, screaming '*look at me*'. I don't own a pollution machine; don't need one in Seattle. Take public transit. But I have to admit, this is fun to drive."

The cabin was a 4200 square foot log home with four bedrooms and five bathrooms, a home theater, a gourmet kitchen with European appliances in a great room where the knotty pine ceilings soared twenty feet, and a jacuzzi, suitable for a group of sixteen, set in a massive deck overlooking a private alpine lake.

They settled right in, hiking the trail around the lake, picking a bouquet of Indian paintbrush, lupine and snapdragon before soaking in the hot tub. Dylan cooked pasta with salmon filets and a green salad. They ate on the deck as the sun set over the mountains, the woods on the far side of the lake disappearing in the evening haze, earth and sky melding together above the repeating rippling rings, like harmonious notes dropped into consciousness, of fish feeding.

Dylan found the wine cellar and selected a Bordeaux, a Chateau Fombrauge.

“This is too good not to try,” he said, pouring Amy a glass.

“Should I?” she asked.

“You’re old enough,” he said, “The French share wine with their children; they just water it down a bit. But this isn’t house wine. It’s too good to water down.”

Watching a movie after dinner, Amy fell asleep with her head on Dylan’s shoulder.

In the morning she found him on the deck engaged in a slow dance, swooping in slow motion from one foot to another, now swaying low to the ground, back and forth, hands and arms leading the poetic flow. She called to him, but he continued the trance-like movement, his attention focused straight ahead. Amy stood watching him, not knowing what it was, exactly, that he was doing. But she knew that he was very different from anyone that had ever lived in Midland; he was different from anyone she had ever known, and that whatever the difference was, it came from deep within him. It emanated from him in every movement that he made; it was present in the way he walked, so freely and unhindered; it was present in the openness of his expression as he listened to someone speak, betraying neither judgment nor affirmation, but acceptance. For the first time she understood that there really was something beyond Midland and its endless rows of earth.

Their days in the cabin were spent lazily. Amy slept in while Dylan danced his welcome to the sun. Each morning they hiked the trail around the still lake, gathering the stones and sticks and feathers that

were woven into macramé dream catchers, and bouquets of wildflowers. At the hottest moment of the afternoon they splashed in the icy waters of the lake before running up to the hot tub on the deck.

Dylan told Amy about Shirlene, how beautiful and innocent she had been; uncorrupted, he said. He was captivated by her purity, her willingness to adventure, to take life in.

“What happened?” Amy asked, the words spilled out so fully as if to question the loss of paradise, and her place within it.

Dylan sat quietly, his chin resting on his chest, and for a moment Amy saw a vacant weariness in his eyes, a questioning squint punctuated by the crow’s feet that normally crinkled his welcoming glint. It was a moment when a child recognizes the need not to trespass, to let rest the anguish of the adult mind in order to preserve the safe boundaries of existence. She left unnoticed, returning to the dining room table and its treasure of feathers and hemp where she built a web of dreams out of the sticks and stones gathered from the water’s shore.

By dinner Dylan was restored, his good humor fed by wine and the cool evening breeze rippling like a current of cheer across the lake. He told Amy about sitting on the swing on his porch and watching the ships that floated through the harbor below his house in Seattle, headed for exotic locales like Ceylon and Bali where bananas and coconuts fell into your hands and fish jumped into your nets. People there had more important things to do than work, he said. They played and danced all day; their clothes were bright and gay and art was so much a part of their lives that there was no need for galleries

and museums; art was in their clothes and utensils, incorporated in the furniture and houses. Art was life. Some day, he said, they would stow away on one of the ships that passed by his house and sail into the South China Sea to such lands where people live in peace and harmony.

For the rest of the summer, after Dylan had dropped her off at the house, under the elms and oaks surrounded by fields of sugar beets and potatoes, Amy talked about how wonderful her dad was and how he was going to take her to far away places more beautiful than anywhere anyone in Midland had ever seen.

“He doesn’t have a swing,” her mother said, “or a porch. He doesn’t have anything, Amy, other than his fancy talk. I wouldn’t put too much faith in your father if I were you.”

“You’re just jealous,” Amy yelled back, near tears, “because you’re stuck in this nowhere town with Harold and I’m going to see the world.”

“There’s some things in the world you don’t want to see, Amy. Not everything is what it appears to be.”

But Amy held onto the vision of her father. To her, he was a wizard who could transform her monochrome world into an explosion of color. When she sat cradled in the highest branches of the oak tree she wondered why she lived in such a boring town when the rest of the world was so different. She longed for the magic of her father, the excitement of his world.

Each Christmas and birthday she waited anxiously for his letters which never came. But the memory of him grew within her. At the

dinner table each evening, her mother and Harold with their heads bowed while Harold said grace, Adam's apple bobbing, voice squeaking, she would wonder how her mother could have ended up with such a strange man after being with Dylan. Kneeling in church, her mother and Harold mouthing the same words each week, their voices indistinguishable from the drone of the congregation, she thought of Dylan dancing, his hat on the sidewalk overflowing with money, the crowd applauding. Dylan's world, which she knew only through stories, seemed far more real to her than the world in which she lived.

Harold spent his life on a tractor travelling back and forth, up and down the same fields over and over: disking, seeding, harvesting, disking again. In the evenings after grace and supper he read his Bible, taking notes and planning for the Wednesday night youth Bible study group. Sunday was a day for rest and church and more Bible study, the family gathered around the table after supper while Harold read the verses. The monotony built in Amy like water in a cauldron: random bubbles of dreariness that with each passing season built into rolling torrents of discontent.

Then one day in June, a card came in the mail, addressed to Amelie: It was hand painted, a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. Inside, the worn bills and a note in expansive script: "For my Gypsy Princess on her thirteenth birthday. Buy something that is as beautiful as you are. Dylan." Thirty dollars, the price of the shoes. How could he have known? He really was a wizard.

Amy set the kick stand and parked her bike in front of the display window, walked through the plate glass door into Mortensen's Department Store. She headed quickly to the display window that held the shoes, so fearful that some other person who had been watching and longing for the red velvet pumps as their price steadily fell, a waitress at the café, a young husband dreaming of his wife, might beat her to them, that she could think only of the shoes, was so preoccupied that she was unaware of anything or anyone else. Just as she reached out greedily grasping the shoes five hairy fat fingers grabbed her wrist.

"Just what do you think you are doing, young lady?" It was Edwin Mortensen III, the portly heir to the once grand store who in the decline of Midland was forced to roam the floor in his suspenders and bow tie.

Amy turned in alarm.

"I'm going to buy these shoes," she said determinedly.

Mortensen looked her up and down through thick bifocals: the tomboy bowl cut, stained T shirt and worn cutoffs, scabby knees and dirty feet in flip flops.

"They're sixty dollars, you know."

"Un huh! Thirty, sign says."

"Look here," Mortensen scolded, turning the price tag to show her the price in red ink over the scratched out \$90.00 and \$120.00. "Says sixty dollars, plain as day."

"The sign in the window says half off. That makes thirty, which is what I got." Amy stared defiantly at the corpulent storekeeper.

Mortensen eased his grip on the girls' arm. His eyes were fixed on hers, but his mind drifted to a time and place far more sophisticated than the circumstance he was forced to endure. For a brief moment he was transported to the excitement of the LA Fashion Market: block after block, building upon building of thrillingly contemporary clothes and accessories. Twice a year he allowed himself this escape from the oppression of Midland. Of course, he had to be brutally disciplined in what he bought for the store, depressingly conservative in his purchases. Midland wasn't LA, after all. He looked at the red velvet pumps now clutched in the girls' hands with their provocative straps and wondered how he could have been so indiscriminate; he had been carried away by the romance of it all, the excitement of the grand city with its beautifully exotic women dressed with such glamour and abandon. He had been a fool.

"You'll have to wash your feet before you try them on," he said.

"I'll just take them," Amy told him.

She put the flip flops in her bicycle basket and sat on the curb, almost unable to believe that the shoes were really hers. She slipped her feet into them, buckling the straps hidden by red suede bows on the back of each ankle, then stood up. Her heart raced as she wobbled down the sidewalk, throwing her hips in an exaggerated motion. Her satin purse, dangling from her wrist, swayed back and forth with each step. She was an incongruous sight, in her cut-offs and T shirt, gangly legs and arms. She held her head erect, chin slightly forward. She had watched *Breakfast at Tiffany's* a dozen times, eating popcorn in the afternoon while her mother folded laundry on the sofa in the front

room. In the red high heels she felt as elegant as Audrey Hepburn strolling the sidewalks of Manhattan.

She kept her eyes forward, she was too much a lady to acknowledge the common people of Midland, but her peripheral awareness was keenly searching for their response. But unlike Manhattan, there were no hordes of people on the sidewalks of Midland. She walked a block before her first encounter: Mrs. Smethcott, president of the Women's Auxiliary, who was getting out of her Cadillac in front of Betty Mae's Beauty Parlor, held the door a moment as she stared at the apparition approaching her.

"Amy Stempel. Is that you?"

Amy stopped in front of the woman. Mrs. Smethcott wore black tights and an Oakland Raiders sweatshirt that covered her large belly but hung in folds on her round haunches.

"I swear you've grown a foot since I last seen you. Those're some shoes you got; them the one's that's been in Mortensen's window?"

Amy nodded her head, barely acknowledging the woman.

"Your mom know you're down here sashaying around, Amy? Girl can get in trouble walkin' around in shoes like that."

"I've got to be going now, Mrs. Smethcott," Amy said in her best Audrey Hepburn voice.

The world had not been transformed as she had hoped it would be. Midland was still Midland: the sky was bleached colorless by the sun, the tired brick storefronts, some of them remodeled with stucco and plate glass before being left vacant, or occupied by second hand merchants, religious bookstores or odd mixtures of fabrics, used

books and knick knacks, were revealed even more lifeless than she remembered in the heat.

She turned, retreating toward Mortensen's and her bicycle propped in front of the storefront two blocks away. Across the street a door opened in the periphery of her consciousness: the Wagon Wheel Tavern. A phrase of mournful music momentarily filled the street as she caught a glimpse of a cowboy hat, a buckle's reflection in her eye, a male figure stumbling, then an arm catching the entrance wall, the figure held upright. Her breath halted, feeling the eyes, the admiration. Her head rose higher, her chest thrust forward, the purse dancing on her arm, hips swaying. Then it came. Its music filled the town with the recognition of her womanliness, her beauty: the long firm crescendo and exhilarating roll of the whistle.

Elated and afraid at the same time, she hurried to her bike. Riding with the red pumps still on her feet, she giggled and pedaled as fast as she could. She thought of finding Bethany, showing her the red shoes, sharing with her the excitement of their magic. But how could she explain such a feeling, the discovery of her power. She knew that talking about it would only diminish the memory, make it small and insignificant. She wanted to hold onto it, keep it close so that she could relive it, sense it again, just as it had happened.

As she bicycled toward home she saw Bill Isacson's truck pulled to the side of the road. In the distance Harold's tractor was stopped in the field and Bill had his foot on the rim of the tire, waving his arms wildly, gesticulating a story that Harold listened to attentively. Then the two men saw her riding up the lane, Harold's frown fixed on her as Bill turned and stared.

When she reached the farmhouse she ran upstairs to her room, the red shoes clutched in her hands. She heard the tractor, racing in high gear, the whining of its engine getting louder and louder until it stopped in the yard. She heard the clumping of his boots on the back porch, the slap of the screen door, then his high voice raspy with anger shrieking throughout the house.

“Shirlene!”

She heard the footsteps from the living room into the kitchen, her mother’s muffled voice punctuated by Harold’s angry pleading.

“As long as she lives in this house!” he cried.

“Disgrace to the family name!” he exhorted.

“Eyes of the Lord!” he proclaimed.

Then her mother’s footsteps on the stairs and her bedroom door creaking open.

“What happened in town today, Amy? Your father’s all upset.”

“He isn’t my dad. Dylan’s my dad.”

“Harold’s the man that puts a roof over your head and food on your table; he gave you his name. You owe him something for that.”

“Nothing happened.”

“That’s not what Bill Isacson said. Evidently you caused quite a scene.”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“He said something about some red shoes. Can I see them?”

“They belong to me. I bought them with my own money.”

“I just want to have a look.”

Amy got the shoes out of her closet.

“These the one’s in Mortensen’s window?” Shirlene asked.

Amy nodded.

“Noticed them myself. I could see where they might stir things up a bit.”

They sat side by side on Amy’s bed for a while. The curtains wafted with the afternoon breeze. One of the shoes lay on the quilted pink bedspread between them, its leather ankle strap stretched out innocently. Shirlene held the other in both hands. Her forearms rested on her knees as she looked down, somewhere beyond the shoes, for what seemed to Amy like a mysteriously long time.

“Guess I better hold on to these for you for a while, till things cool down,” she finally said. “I’ll give them back when you’re ready for them.”

Amy clutched at the shoes. “You can’t take what’s mine!” she pleaded.

“It’s just for a while, Honey. I promise.”

“There isn’t anything for me, Momma. I can’t even be who I am, not here.”

“It takes time, Amy. For all of us. Being who you really are, that doesn’t come easy. It takes time.”

Shirlene held the shoes in one hand, the door knob in the other. She rested her head and shoulder on the jamb. “It all comes in time. You’ll see.” Then she closed the door.

The seed had been planted in the earth. The year’s longest days spread warmth across the land, beckoning the sprouting seed into the light. The tractors rested in their sheds while laborers let water soak in the furrows. It was a time of languishing before the hurry of

harvest. In the weeks of June, when the heat builds and the first trace of shoots pierce green through the darkened earth, one can feel the yearning of life, the sultry writhing within.

Shirlene pulled the chair to the closet door and, stepping up, found the shoes that she had hidden in the box on the top shelf, tucked under an old sweater next to the wall. Harold would be home early, she knew, after checking on the water and visiting with the neighbors, discussing the weather and the cost of supplies. He wouldn't be tired like he always was during planting and harvest. Amy was at Bethany's for the night. It was just her and Harold, no interruptions, no worries.

She pulled the red high heels out of the box and lay them on the bed. Below them in the box were the black fishnet stockings she had saved all these years, hidden away. They were a remnant from her time in Seattle, a time when she was free to follow her yearning. Perhaps she shouldn't have kept things hidden. Harold was a man after all. She took her pants and blouse off and pulled the stockings over her carefully polished toenails, up her long smooth legs. He wasn't such a bad looking man, and he had been good to her. She had come to see that he wasn't rigid so much as he was solid, never wavering from the path that kept them safe and warm, her and Amy. He deserved more than she had given him. She gave him only what he expected, what he took. But there was so much more to give, so much more to share with him. She took her plain white bra off and put on the black lace bra she had bought in Boise, so no one would know, the word spreading from Mortensen's to the Women's Auxillary, for just this occasion. Then she pulled the red shoes onto her feet, the bright red toe nails seductively veiled behind the black lace, and wrapped

the leather straps around her ankles. She moved to the mirror and colored her lips full and red, pouting in the dim light. She imagined him behind her, could see in the mirror his intense eyes devouring her. She felt his breathe upon her shoulder, the trembling fingers that caressed her tummy, his lips hungering over her neck. Gently she swayed back and forth in his arms. She felt the warmth of his cheek against hers, inhaled the musk of his hair. She closed her eyes and saw the light flickering through the Flaming Ash, heard the murmuring procession of excitement. Now she was twirling in the control of his graceful strength, her body and being his instrument. He twirled her to the bed where, hidden in the labyrinth of him, she felt his weight, the sinewy firmness of his flesh. His lips touched hers, softly teasing her desire, his tongue gently probing. In a burst she succumbed, passionately grasping his head she entwined her tongue with his. His fingers traced the length of her inner thigh, the one long nail thrilling in its intensity. Her back arched and she moaned as his fingers moved inside the black lace panties.

“What in hell are you doing, Shirlene?”

She had not noticed him come in, had not heard the sputtering of the diesel in the driveway, the slapping of the screen door.

“I was just getting ready for you, Harold. I wanted to please you.”

“Like that?”

Shirlene moved toward Harold, put her hands on his chest, kissed his neck.

“It’s those damn shoes, isn’t it? Like a curse on this house.”

“Come on Honey, I’m right here. Let’s enjoy each other.” She pulled him to the bed. She lay back, her soft skin milky against the black bra and stockings, one leg extended, the red shoe resting coyly against Harold’s leg.

“Give me them!” he spat the words, wrestling the shoe from her foot.

Shirlene struggled and kicked. “Those are Amy’s! You can’t take them.” She was shrieking, crying, her passion released in an unexpected way.

Harold turned at the door to face her, breathing hard and angry.

“Don’t ever let me see you like this again, Shirlene.”

She heard the back door slam closed and moved to the window. The sun had set and the eastern sky was a darkening plane of gloom hovering over the endless fading fields. There was no definition to him, or to the world; he was just a nondescript form, a shadow moving across a backdrop of shadows. She saw him next to the fire barrel, his back toward her, wadding up the morning paper, gathering sticks and cardboard; then the glow of the fire around him, like an aura of white light, as he dropped each shoe into the flames.

Harold stood behind the front door looking out through the thick oval glass. Shirlene ran out into the yard when the patrol car pulled into the lane. The trooper got out of the car, put his campaign hat on, straightened his midnight blue uniform and, standing erect, he walked around and opened the back door, shielding Amy’s head as she stepped from the car. Shirlene’s chest heaved a great sob and tears streaked her cheeks as she opened her arms. Amy stood rigidly

with her arms at her sides and turned her face from the embrace, shriveling from her mother's kisses.

"Why did you run away? Why, Amy? Why?"

Amy stood looking at the ground, her eyes squinting painfully.

"Ma'am," the trooper stepped forward, handing Shirlene a paper. "You'll have to call the number on the citation to set up a court date."

"Court date?"

"Yes Ma'am. Running away from home is against the law in Idaho. And, Ma'am, I'd say your girl was pretty lucky she hid in the truck she did. That trucker turned out to be a nice guy, but these stories don't all end happy. Be sure to call the court so I don't have to make another trip out here."

They walked toward the house with Shirlene's arm around her daughter's shoulders until, squirming, Amy escaped the unwanted emotion. Harold, behind the door, stood motionless as they entered.

"I have some lemonade for you, and shortbread cookies. You know me, when I get nervous I start baking." Shirlene again put her arm around Amy, who again shirked away.

"I just want to go to my room." Amy mumbled the words angrily.

"Well, honey, I think we should sit down and talk this out. We can't just let something like this go; it'll fester and grow if we don't get it out. Come on in and let's sit at the table." Shirlene took her by the hand and led her into the kitchen. They hardly noticed Harold, who shuffled in behind them.

The Formica table sat in an alcove on the end of the kitchen next to the dining room door. On one side of the table was a built in bench with curtainless windows above. Amy sat sideways in the plain

wooden chair, one foot headed toward the dining room door. Shirlene poured two glasses of lemonade and placed the plate of cookies in front of Amy, then sat opposite her.

The two of them sat mutely. Amy was filled with a feeling so big it made her ache with hurt and anger. She didn't know how it got there or what it was or how to get it out of her, except to just run away from it. Shirlene thought of herself those years ago, running to the same world Amy was running to, and tried to make some sense of it all; she wanted to understand how it had led to this moment in this place and this time, to give it some meaning that she could put into words. She held her hands with her fingers laced together on the table, her cheeks stained by her puffy eyes, holding herself as calmly as she could against the dissonance within, waiting for the words to come.

She heard the scrape of the chair as Harold pulled it out and sat between them. He placed his bible in front of him, its open pages arched like wings, and on its pages he placed his heavy black glasses. He pinched his nose between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, sighed deeply, and then leaned forward carefully placing the bows of his glasses back over each ear. He cleared his throat and began to read.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

He heard her footsteps on the stairs as he finished. Shirlene gazed out the window, somewhere far beyond what could be seen. In the distance a tractor droned its endless journey up and down the rows of earth, and the pendulum of the hallway clock marked the passage of each moment.