Your Shoes

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I thought I knew you as well as I know this house. No secret places, no hidey-holes, nothing in you I couldn't see. Now I realise how you kept yourself from me, how I didn't really know you at all.

You're not here any longer so how can I speak to you? Yu can't speak to someone who isn't there. Only mad people talk to an empty chest of drawers, a bed that hasn't been slept in for weeks. Someone half-mad, with grief that is, might pick up a shoe from the rug and hold it like a baby. Someone like me might do that. As if the shoe might still be warm or give a clue to where you've gone. One shoe pointed in fact towards the bedroom window, the view of the front garden, and the other pointed towards the door. They wanted to get out, to get away, just like you did. I made them neat again. I stowed them in the wardrobe. Just in case. I locked the wardrobe door on those rebellious shoes. They could be like me and grieve in the darkness. For a bit. Then I let them out. I'm not cruel. But they've got to learn, haven't they. Kids these days. Well.

I can't send you a letter, either, because I don't know your address. There's no point really in writing this because it can't reach you. You have to live in a house with a front door and a letter-box if the postman is to deliver mail, and I don't suppose you dol. It's not very likely, is it, you've found yourself a place. I don't know where you are. You just went off, just ran out of the house in the middle of the night, and left me.

It costs me a lot to admit that, can't you understand? If I wrap my arms around myself and hold tight it keeps the pain in. Stops it spilling out and making a terrible mess. If I keep my mouth pursed tight I can't scream or throw up. If I imagine that you're gone for good, that you'll never come back, then this terrible wailing sound will begin and never stop, I might go mad. At least this paper has rule lines my writing can't fall off.

If you opened the door now and came in you'd find me here in your room. I'm lying curled up in the middle of the bed, on top of the duvet. I've drawn the curtains because the light hurts my eyes. It's already lunchtime but I don't

want to face the fridge, the freezer, the microwave. I'm not hungry. I'm better off here, looking at the locked wardrobe door. Your shoes are standing outside it now, side by side. The right shoe on the right-hand side and the left shoe on the left. In their proper places, no fuss, like a husband and wife. I'd like you to get married one day. I'd like you to have a normal life, of course I would. I've tied the shoes' laces together so they won't get separated or lost. White laces, that I washed and ironed.

What did you have for lunch today? I hope you ate something. Did you beg for the money to buy a burger or a sandwich? I'd like to think you had a proper lunch. Something hot. Soup, perhaps, in a Styrofoam cup. You used to loved tinned tomato soup. Cream of. I always urged you to eat proper meals, meat and two veg or something salady, when you got home from school. You liked snacks better as you got older, it was the fashion amongst your friends I think, all day long you ate crisps and buns and I don't know what, at teatime when you came in you'd say you weren't hungry then late at night I'd catch you raiding the kitchen cupboards. Fistfuls of currants and sultanas you'd jam into your mouth, one custard cream after another, you'd wolf all my supply of chocolate bars.

How do you feed yourself out there on the street? You're too young to get a job, who'd have you and what could you possibly do? What do you have to do to be fed? Do you have to go with men, is that it? How else could you get the money if you don't beg? There are so many of you begging for the money to buy food, stands to reason there isn't enough to go round. People don't like being continually asked, do they, they don't like being treated like bottomless pits. These days you have to choose who to give money to. I don't mean the starving millions in Africa, I mean the people of your age hanging about outside the supermarkets and the tube stations up in London, around the railway stations, I've seen the photos in the newspapers, it's not very nice having to imagine you mixing with people like that. Drug addicts and so on. You're fifteen years old. What do those men make you do? What do you have to do to get money for food?

Your father didn't mean it when he told you those things the other night. You've got to understand, he lost his temper and used some unfortunate expressions. At your age I'm sure I wouldn't have known the meaning of any

of those words. As a young girl I'd have been hit if I used such language as I've heard you use. I was very old—fashioned. Square, they called it then. I grew up in a very old-fashioned family. Of course we had marvellous times together but my father was very strict. It didn't do me any harm. There was no truancy in our family in those days I can assure you, we simply wouldn't have dared. It was unthinkable. Not like you and your friends. We weren't spoilt. Not like your generation. These enormous presents at Christmas and so on. There wasn't the money. Your father works himself nearly to death for his family, for us. Because he loves us and wants us to have what he didn't. Little luxuries. What you and your lot take for granted. And me with my teaching job, I've done my bit for you too. We've given you everything a child could possibly want.

I'm sure you'd never have left if you realised I'd be this upset. You didn't mean to hurt me, did you. You never meant to make me so unhappy I'm sure. It was that mob you got in with at school. That Vanessa for instance. I wouldn't be surprised to hear she's on drugs. She had that look. You're so innocent, you didn't realise. You're too trusting, too kind, you don't know what these people can be like.

People pretend to be kind but they're ghouls. They ring up to see how I am and I can hear them gloat. It's not their fifteen-year-old daughter who's left home and gone off God knows where. The doctor's given me something to help me sleep and I've taken a week's sick leave from school. I try to put on a cheerful face. Oh, I say: she'll be back soon, I'm sure of it, why, she hasn't even taken her new shoes!

I don't think you have a clue how we feel. Just because we're not ones for letting it all out in public doesn't mean we don't live with this terrible pain. We don't speak of it much. But of course we know how each other feels. We have to be brave, we have to get on with living. The doctor told me: try to live from day to day. That's what they tell dying people too, I've heard it on a radio programme on hospices. You're not to die, d'you hear. You're alive somewhere aren't you. Sooner or later you'll ring up won't you from wherever you are. Some squat full of dropouts and drug addicts. Some cardboard box under a bridge. Some pile of filth. Of course they wouldn't have

telephones there, I know that, you what I mean. My daughter sleeping on a pile of filth. I can't bear it.

You've got to understand. When your father called you a dirty slut he didn't mean you to take it personally. It was just a manner of speaking. In the heat of the moment. He adores you, you know that. It's just that he feels protective of you, and he can't stand being answered back. He can't stand rudeness. Not from you, not from anybody. What did you expect, being brought home drunk at three in the morning? We were half out of our minds with worry, of course we were upset. I've always thought of you as just an empty-headed blonde, I've never thought you were really bad. Then I find out that you drink alcohol at parties and smoke pot. Of course your father was angry. After all this is his house. You shouldn't have got to so upset. I'm sure he didn't mean all of what he said.

I dreamed of my mother last night. There was so much I wanted to say to her and now it's too late. Daughters ought to be close to their mothers. I wasn't to mine. She was a very stupid woman. She never had much of an education then the war came and she joined up. I've still got a photo of her in uniform. Blonde hair done up in sausages on top of her head, cap stuck on one side, big lipsticked mouth. A plump woman with a loud jolly laugh. Fat, let's be honest. Terribly vulgar, always saying the wrong thing then laughing. My poor father used to wince. He shouldn't have married her, he should have chosen someone more like himself. Then I might have had a better childhood.

My mother was like you, she liked a drink. She used to do the housework with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth, then she'd put her feet up and have a gin and tonic. She was very clean, I'll give her that, she kept us and the house spotless. She never had much time for me, I was just a girl, she preferred my brother. She thought I should be a housewife like her but I surprised everybody by getting into college to do domestic science. She brought me up to know how to fill bride rolls for parties, how to make Yorkshire pudding for Sunday lunch. Then I went ahead of her and learned about nutritional science. Miss La-di-Da she used to call me. I was thin, rather plain. I was fair like her, but my hair was straight. She had hers dyed more and more golden. She had a bouffant perm. The face powder used to collect in the creases o her cheeks and melt. Then she's powder over it. She wore a girdle to hold herself in. She

lived her whole married life in a suburb in a detached house with four bedrooms and she thought it was heaven. Well, she would, after the semi-slum she grew up in up north. She was jealous because I loved my father more than her. We'd go for walks in the park together. We talked about things she couldn't understand.

It always hurt me, how nice she was to you. She spoiled you. She loved you more than she loved me. It isn't fair. That was the cry of my girlhood. I had to help with the housework but my brother did nothing. I was always racing to get done so I could go out with my father. He took me to the golf club and introduced me to all his friends. Once he took me to the pub. He told me I was bright and had a real future ahead of me. I swore that when I grew up I wouldn't be like my mother. Well at least I've kept my figure. I'm not fat like she was. She wore the most unsuitable clothes. Always whatever was in fashion, regardless, she liked bright colours, lots of costume jewellery, she looked a bit of a tart, let's face it, stiletto heels, charm bracelets, the lot.

You've got small feet just like mine. Like hers. All the women in our family have small feet. Sturdy, with a strong arch and short toes. For a couple of years now I've been able to buy your shoes without having to drag you round the shops. Moan whine, after ten minutes in Marks you'd threaten you were going to faint and I had to get you ut into the fresh air. They're lovely, these shoes I bought you. White trainers, you see I know what you like. I thought you'd love them. I'm looking after them for you. I've got them under the duvet with me now. I'm keeping an eye on them, oh yes. They are perfect because they are new, they've never been worn.

I had a white wedding. My father had been saving for it for years, he said nothing was too good for his little girl. He gave me away, I walked down the aisle on his arm feeling numb. I married your father on the rebound, everybody knew that I was desperately in love with Peter, he was the great love of my life, when he went off and left me I thought I might as well marry your father. He was always there in the background, he'd been waiting for me. He's been a good husband, a good father. Everyone said how lucky I was. Of course I never told my mother I wasn't a virgin, she's have had fifty fits. My father would have killed me if he'd known.

Of course I wanted you. Of course I love you. It's hurtful and wicked to say I don't. I suppose it's my fault you've left home to sleep rough God knows where. Go on, blame your mother, everyone else does. I'm a failure as a mother. I didn't give you enough of whatever it was. You've always been very difficult. I did my best, what more could I do? Next thing you'll be saying it's because I didn't breastfeed you, or because I didn't pick you up every time you cried. You can't imagine what it was like. At night you cried so much, in the end I used to shut the door on you and go back downstairs. I was exhausted. Your father slept through most of it, he said it wasn't his job. Just like my father. He wasn't interested in my when I was little, then when I was older and showed I had a brain, that was when he got involved. Oh but we did have a lot of happy times too. I know we did. Don't forget that. I wish you wouldn't sulk. I wish you'd stop sulking and answer me.

It's cosy in here. Peaceful too. I've unplugged the telephone so that I can concentrate on you and we shan't be disturbed. It'll be dark soon, the street lamps have just come on, I can see one shining through the curtains. Funny, you never did like these curtains. I remember I got them in a sale up in town, I thought they were lovely, really modern with these splashes of white and grey, they were exactly what I'd have wanted as a girl. Then when you came home and saw what I'd done you flew into a temper, you said you wanted the old curtains back. By then it was too late, I'd thrown them away. I'd gone to so much trouble to give you a surprise, I couldn't believe you'd be so ungrateful. Then you had to go and burst into floods of tears, that was the last straw, oh you used to be so unkind to me. Throwing my presents back in my face.

At first I kept the shoes in the box I made them pack them in at the shop, tenderly wrapped in tissue-paper. Delicate white sheets, rustling, uncreased. Then I tried them in the wardrobe, then side by side on the rug. They're best in here with me I think, safe and warm in bed. Tucked up tight.

How could you do that to us. How could you. Boasting about it even. I think you wanted us to find out. Thank God I had the sense to look in your bag that night. You laughed at me, you said lots of girls in your class had had sex by the time they were fifteen, you weren't going to be the exception.

After my mother died I had to clear out her clothes and pack them up for jumble. Her shoes hurt me so much. Rows of high heels, all of them too small for her, she was so vain, all of them moulded to the shape of her poor feet. You could see how her toes were all bent over, misshapen. Bulges where she's had bunions, corn-plasters. Who'd have wanted them? I threw them all in the dustbin. Then on the way home I stopped the car and bought you a pair of new shoes as a surprise, really beautiful ones, the best I could afford.

Your father will be home soon. I've locked the bedroom door so that he can't get in. I want to be alone with you for a bit. My darling girl whom I love so much. I hold you to my breast and rock you like my mother never rocked me. You're so small and pale. Let me hold you while you cry.

Laces like strings of white liquorice. They taste sweet.

There, my darling, there. You're at home with mother, everything's all right. I knew you'd come back, I knew you'd come back to me.

I love you I love you so much oh yes oh yes.