

Seattle 1979

By Dion O'Reilly

I looked down and saw that my shoes were stupid. I burst into tears.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" The hamburger cook thumped my back as if I was choking. Five minutes ago, he had been trying to sleep with me. Now he was beginning to think I might be too crazy to safely seduce.

His awkward pats slowed, ceased, and he finally left. Too bad. I wanted someone to talk to. I was sitting alone on the steps of the Fremont library. I cleaned-up garbage and sold tickets in a crappy movie theater, where I ate too many of the candy bars. My parents still gave me money. I couldn't keep my weight down. And I couldn't get laid.

I could get laid, but my shoes were too stupid and my gut was far too fat for me to consider fornication. Besides, I wanted River, and he didn't love me. He had promised to love me, but he went back to his girlfriend. I had been pining for a year. Lately, I had taken to walking three miles in the Seattle rain to his broken-down truck which he'd abandoned near the university. I'd pull out my harmonica, lean against the fender and play "Since I Fell for You."

The cook came back, strutting down the street to where I sat hunched in front of the closed, ornate doors of the library. His cowboy hat added some height, but when I stood, I was taller. He seemed angry when I looked down at him.

"You know," he said, picking up the threads of our earlier conversation, "I haven't taken a cent from my parents since I was sixteen."

"Oh, OK..." I looked at him without wiping my tears. "I'm not so sad. I'm fine, really. Here's a joke: What did the sign on the whorehouse say?"

"What"

"We're closed. Beat it."

He stared at me. "Are you, uh, trying to tell me something?"

My throat ached. My pants cut into my waist, and they were too short. When I was thinner, they fell down on my hips. I looked down again and realized my socks were different colors. I couldn't keep anything straight.

"You're not so bad-looking. You should cocktail waitress. I could get you a job at the bar and grill. Why don't you just come over to my house and mellow out? Have a drink. Jeez, lighten up, woman."

I thought about it. If I got out of these pants, if there were gentle hands touching my stomach instead of this tight grip, if I wore cute shoes, if I quit taking money from my parents, if I found a better job, maybe cocktail waitressing, I wouldn't be such a failure.

I turned toward Lake Union. The sun was setting, and the clouds were swelling with color. The trees, stripped of leaves, were stark against the lavender sky.

River didn't love me. Never would.

My ugly sneakers were for running. My mother had sent them with a note suggesting I exercise. I left the cook standing there and jogged to the lake, the sky melding apricot and pale yellow around the remains of the sun. It was chilly, and the dark branches dripped water on my head.

When I arrived at the shore, it was nearly night. I stripped and jumped in, sinking into the cold, black water, feeling it on every corner of my skin. My shoes and pants, abandoned on the rough sand, waited for me to pick them up, to run home barefoot and go to sleep, to dream of water and indigo trees.

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