

NINA'S SHOES

Ellie was potty training Nina while Michael was dying.

She was also smoking too much and eating too much and not sleeping very well. Michael wasn't doing much of anything. Sometimes odd, random thoughts filtered across his mind. I don't have to worry about smoking anymore. I'll never see Florence. I'll never be old. And then, one day, when he was having a cup of tea in his mother's kitchen (he was living with his parents again) and listening to Bernard Meltzer on the radio and watching his mother wipe down the kitchen counter, he suddenly thought, *It's so easy. So simple. All I have to do is die. Nothing else. Just die.* And then he lit a cigarette, and his mother tried not to make a face, and he tried not to notice how his hands were shaking.

Most of the time, Ellie felt like she was going crazy. But she never said anything to Michael. What could she have said?

"I wish you'd stop dying. It's driving me nuts."

So, instead, they talked about Nina's progress with the potty.

"How's she doing?" Michael asked.

"Coming along," Ellie said.

"How long does this take, anyway?"

Well, that was Michael's nature. He always wanted instant results. When they told him he was going to die -- well, actually, no one ever told him that. They told him he had "it" and then they hemmed and hawed and mumbled because there was no cure for "it" and not much in the way of treatment (this was in 1985), but nobody wanted to come right out and say any of that. So, they talked to him about maintaining himself and the things he could do to try to fight off future infections, but he knew. He knew there would

be future infections. Not too distant future. And plenty of infections. A cold could kill him now. A throat infection. A stomach virus. And those were the simple things. There were also more exotic possibilities. Rare forms of pneumonia. Unusual skin cancers. Brain lesions. He knew they were hemming and hawing because they had to say something, and he knew he was going to die. And once he knew, he wanted to die that day. But that wasn't the way "it" worked. "It" lulled him again and again, if not into outright optimism, to guarded equanimity. Yes, he had had two bouts with pneumonia, and each time he thought he would die, and he wanted to die. *I'm so sick of this, he thought. It's so hard and I'm so sick of all of it.* But he didn't die. And each time, only a few weeks later, he felt fine again. Well, not fine, but close enough to fine to sit in his mother's kitchen and have a cup of tea and listen to Bernard Meltzer and smoke a cigarette without experiencing any unwelcome epiphanies. It was hard, then, for him to remember how sick he had been and how sick of all of it, but he was, he knew, beginning to have some trouble remembering lots of things.

It started with **The New York Times**. He was sitting in the kitchen with the paper in front of him and he was confused because he was sure it was Tuesday, but the special section in front of him was Living and that was the Thursday section.

Monday - Sports. Who cares? Never look at it.

Tuesday - Science. Occasionally interesting. He has a mutant's interest in odd, rare diseases and conditions with strange manifestations. Like Tourette's Syndrome. That was one of his favorites. Jane Brody, on any day, however, is too disgusting. Yeast infections. Warts. Boils. There is no lump, no abscess, no opportunity to describe bodily ooze that Ms. Brody will leave untaken.

Wednesday - Home. Moldy grout? Loose tiles? Warped floorboards? Ah, to chintz or not to chintz.

Thursday - Living. Vin calls it Having.

Friday - Weekend.

*All right. I know them all, Michael thought. I know the days of the week according to the **Times**. But why is Living here when today is Tuesday? It is Tuesday. I now it is.*

"What day is it?" he asks his mother.

"Thursday, Mickey. It's on the paper. Right in front of you."

"They're not always right," he says. "Even the **Times** makes mistakes."

"What dear?" She is putting cans in the cabinet. Tomato sauce in the back.

Smaller cans in the front.

"I'm tired," he says. "I can't remember."

"Remember what, dear?"

But that was a couple of weeks ago. He is at Ellie's now. He remembers. He drove here. He came in. They had a soda. They were talking about something ...

"They say it's because it's something they made by themselves. They're proud of it," Ellie was explaining. "They don't want to lose it."

"Jesus Christ," Michael said. They were talking about baby shit.

"Well," Ellie tried another approach. "Think about it. How many things can a kid her age do all by herself? This is one of her first solo accomplishments."

"Let's hope it's not her last," Michael said.

"Or her finest," Ellie added.

He had known Ellie forever, it seemed to him. Twenty-five years and counting. They were little kids when they met, eleven years old. He was the new boy in school -- short and chubby with dark black hair and dark brown eyes. He was the boy who wore glasses and hated sports and liked to hang around with girls. Well, some girls. He was fascinated by old movies and old movie stars. Bette Davis. Joan Crawford. Katharine Hepburn. Sometimes he tried to imagine that he was someone else. He was the

abandoned and adopted son of a movie star. No one must ever know, but he knew. His real mother was Marilyn Monroe.

Every school had a boy like him. Or two. Or three. Then, he thought he was the only one in the world, but now he knew better. He was the one in his school. Not the only one, maybe, but the one people noticed the most. Or so it seemed to him. He was the one the girls invited up to their bedrooms for intimate talks. He was the one they trusted with their secrets and their confessions. He was their friend. Not a boyfriend. But a friend who was a boy. And this gave him a status almost above a boyfriend. He gave them advice about clothes and hair-dos, and they talked to him like he was one of them. Only he was better than a girlfriend. Because he was still a boy.

The parents noticed him, too.

You know what he is, don't you?

That was what they whispered. Only they didn't whisper very well because he always heard them.

You don't know what I am, he thought. You don't know anything about me.

But he always thought he was different.

He always thought he was special.

They think I'm a queer, he thought.

But that wasn't what made him different and special. Ellie knew that. She knew right away. She knew what people said, but she knew that that was not what made him different and special.

She knew he was an artist.

She felt it in her soul.

That was what made him different and special.

What made him a queer was not so different. No so different from their own little

daughters whose eyes widened and breath grew faint as their certain someones brushed past them in the hall on their way to gym or French or American History. Yes, then he was one of the girls as they all sighed and gazed longingly and lovingly after Bob or Jim or Mike or Ray.

But he never talked about his feelings to them. Not to any of them. Not even Ellie. That was his secret. It kept him apart. And different. And special. Not the feelings. The secret.

And Ellie liked a boy with secrets.

She didn't have to know that the secret was. That didn't matter. It was just that it was.

She was a girl with secrets.

Oh, she looked ordinary enough on the outside and she got along with everybody and she fit in. But that was her cover. Nobody knew what she was underneath. Nobody except Michael. And she never even had to explain it to him. He just knew. They used to walk through those halls in junior high school and high school, two aliens in a sea of cheerleaders and greasers, madras shirts and beehive hair-dos, Future Secretaries of America and basketball players, student council leaders and industrial education dweebs, and they went to Dress Down Day and the junior prom and took parts in the school play and studied for their finals, but none of it had anything to do with what was inside, in the place where she wrote tortured poems late at night and he drew weird, demented pictures, and they recognized each other, although she never showed him her poems and he never showed her his pictures.

That was how it was.

Always and forever.

And here he was, all of these years later, sitting in her living room while she

stood in the doorway of the bathroom and encouraged Nina to use the potty. and she was thinking that he would never see Nina grow up, and he was thinking about high school and their prom queen whose name he couldn't remember, but he did remember her dress, yellow organdy and silk, and her long, blonde hair, and the look on her face when she got to walk around the ballroom of the Huntington Townhouse with a cardboard tiara studded with rhinestones on her head, and he wanted to buy Nina a pair of fancy, black, patent leather Maryjanes for her birthday.

"What size shoes does she wear?" he asked Ellie.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't know?"

"Well, her size changes every three or four months," Ellie explained. "The shoes she has now are a five, but she may be almost ready for a six. They seem a little hard to get on lately. Why?"

"I was thinking about buying her a pair of shoes," Michael said.

"They're expensive," Ellie said.

"They are?"

"Yeah," Ellie leaned against the doorframe and sighed. "Kids' shoes are unbelievable. Thirty, forty bucks a pair."

"You'd think they'd be less since they're smaller," Michael said.

"And they don't wear them for very long," Ellie added.

"Well, I'd like to get her a pair anyway," Michael said.

"Well, you don't have to do that."

Michael didn't have much money. He hadn't worked for months. Of course, he was living at home with his parents now, and they paid for all of his medical stuff, but still, it seemed to Ellie that he had better use for whatever little money he had. Besides,

Nina didn't need party shoes. Ellie was sure that if Michael wanted to buy her shoes, they had to be party shoes. He wasn't likely to think of buying her a pair of Keds or saddle shoes or anything that mundane. No, they would be party shoes, black patent leather, with rhinestones or velvet bows or some such thing. When Nina was born, Michael gave her a hand-crocheted white sweater and hat from Italy. It must have cost him plenty. and, of course, it was completely impractical. The hat tied with a little white ribbon that frayed almost immediately. and the sweater buttoned in the back with little tiny pearl buttons that were incredibly hard to fit into the buttonholes. It was too lightweight a sweater to provide much warmth and too fancy for regular use, anyway. And it was too beautiful to be spat up on, and Nina was a spitter. Michael didn't know about spitting up, but even if he did, it was the sort of thing he would never acknowledge.

He probably spent hours buying that sweater. She knew. She had shopped with Michael for presents for his mother and sister. A birthday or a Christmas present was a major decision with him. It was as if his gifts defined him. They had to be just right. Perfect. Something that absolutely suited the recipient, but also reflected the taste, the attitudes, the very *raison d'etre* of Michael.

Well, that was Michael. He had a very definite vision of things. How they should look. How they should be arranged. He had a collection of small bones in his apartment. He kept them on a piece of blue glass. And the bones were always the same way. This one this way and that one that way. He hated it when people picked up one of his bones and then put it back down. The arrangement was always off then.

And his pictures on his wall! It had taken him almost a year to hang them. For months, every time Ellie came over, he would have her hold this one up here and that one over there. It took him forever to see that the two Chinese ladies should be together

on the right side with the photograph of the wet shoes to the left and the line drawing of himself down below.

This was not Ellie's nature.

In fact, his fastidiousness in these matters was something of a sore point between them.

"How can you pay so much attention to trivia and so little to what's important?" she asked him more than once. She was mad at him because he was hanging around with people she considered to be sleazy and unsavory.

"It's not trivia," he answered her. No one could be haughty like Michael. Haughty and defensive. Dismissing and dismissive.

"You're such a priss," he would tell her.

That was her cue to shut up, and she did.

He would have been proud of his mother and sister at his funeral. They wore white cotton dresses and no makeup and simple black jewelry. His mother wore a necklace. His sister wore a bracelet. Onyx. He had given the jewelry to them the Christmas before he died.

"Jewelry should be real," he announced to Ellie when they went to Macy's together the second week of December. "Real stones may be too expensive, but semi-precious is affordable. And real."

Yes, he wanted the things in his life to be real.

Ellie will never buy Nina party shoes, Michael was thinking. Oh, she'd buy them for Christmas or Easter because otherwise her mother-in-law would have a cow, but she wouldn't buy them in between holidays, just because they're pretty and little girls love them and every girl should have someone in her life who buys her beautiful, fun things that she doesn't need. Ellie's cheap. She'll keep that kid in those same Keds until

they rip to shreds or her feet grow right out of them, and then she'll buy her another pair just like them. No flair. No esprit. The woman has never recognized the importance of accessories. He glanced over to the table where Ellie had left her pocketbook. She had been hanging that bag on her left shoulder for years. Never changed it to match an outfit. Never alternated it with something more seasonal in the summer.

Well, that was one thing he really regretted. When Ellie had Nina he thought that maybe this might be his chance to do something he had thought about doing for a long time. He had always wanted to be a big influence in a child's life. Not like a parent, although he had even entertained that notion occasionally. But deep down inside, he knew he would never be a father. Still, there were other possibilities. If his sister or brother ever got married and had kids, he could be an uncle. A favorite uncle. But that wasn't quite what he had in mind, either. He wanted to be some kind of special person who swooped down into some child's life bringing fabulous presents and magical moments to be treasured forever. Like Uncle **Whateverhisnamewas** in **The Nutcracker** or (excuse the pun) the fairy godmother in **Cinderella**. Well, God knows, it was a cliché and a stereotype and everything else, but the plain fact was that he wanted to be someone's Auntie Mame. He had wanted to be that for years. And now, he knew, he didn't have time to wait for his brother or sister to get married and produce nieces or nephews. But there was Nina. Nina was a real possibility.

Oh, he knew she would get all of the qualities she needed to be a good person from Ellie and Vin. And some other qualities, too. Ellie was always late for everything. and she was cheap. And Vin had been known to get on his high horse now and then. But all in all, he had confidence in Nina's future. It was just that last little thing that only he could provide. That pinch of stardust. That wave of the magic wand.

The party shoes would have to be the whole enchilada for him. And here was Ellie, arguing that it was an impractical idea and too expensive and he didn't have to do that.

If he didn't love her so much, he could get pretty pissed off with her about now.

"She doesn't really need anything," Ellie was saying, but she was thinking, *Oh no, I know you. You keep your grand gestures to yourself, Michael. I am not ready for this. I can't deal with it. All right. I know I'm being selfish. This isn't happening to me. It's happening to you. All of my thoughts and all of my energy should be concentrated in your direction. But I can't help it. Something is happening to me, too. Something awful. And I can't even tell you about it. I can't tell Vin. I can't tell anyone because I don't know what to say. Michael is dying. Michael is going to die. It will happen one day. And soon. I just know it. Yes, you're okay today. and you may be okay tomorrow. But you forget things, and your leg hurts, and you have headaches, and I think there's something wrong with your left eye although you won't tell me anything. How do you feel? I ask you. and you say, fine. Fine! So, I don't ask you anymore. So you come over here and sit there and think about dying and I look at you and think about you dying and you look at me and we end up arguing about party shoes for Nina. But you are not fooling me. So you just keep your grand gestures to yourself. I am not ready for this, Michael.*

And Michael thought, *I'm tired and my head hurts. Oh, no need to worry. It's not my brain disintegrating. It's you, Ellie. You're giving me a headache. Fucking, argumentative little bitch. I just want to buy the kid a pair of shoes. Okay? That's all. No hidden meanings. No big fucking deal. This is not my farewell to the world. I know what you're thinking, Ellie. Character. Symbolism. Significance. Stop writing, Ellie. I am not a character in the novel of your life. You know what Freud said. Sometimes a shoe is just a shoe.*

Well, so what? He didn't need her permission. He'd just do it. I'll get her a size six, he thought, or a seven. Eventually, they'll fit.

"Why are you standing there like that?" he asked suddenly.

"Nina's on the potty," Ellie said.

"I know that!" His voice was too loud.

"All right," Ellie said.

"I didn't forget," he insisted.

"All right," she said.

Size six or size seven. Black patent leather. Shiny. Very shiny. With velvet bows or rhinestones or heart-shaped cut-outs on the side. Special, very special, significant shoes for little Ellie, no Nina, yes, Nina, from Auntie Michael.

Ellie bought the party shoes for Nina in late September. There was no occasion. The Jewish holidays were just past and it was too early to buy party shoes for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

She bought black patent leather shoes with velvet bows across the toes and a circle of rhinestones set in the middle of the bows. They were made in Italy and they cost fifty-five dollars.

She let Nina wear them every day. In the rain. To the playground. In the sandbox. She let her sleep with them under her pillow. Nina was madly in love with her party shoes.

"Nina is my special girl," Ellie whispered to her as she tucked her in at night.

"I have special shoes," Nina answered. "I'm a special girl."

*So, it worked, Michael thought. I feel like James Stewart in **It's A Wonderful***

*Life. And that's saying a lot because I really hate that movie and I hate James Stewart. I'd much rather be Montgomery Clift in **A Place in the Sun**. Well, actually, I'd rather be Elizabeth Taylor in **A Place in the Sun** or Rita Hayworth in **Gilda** or Ava Gardner in anything.*

DIGRESSION! DIGRESSION!

All right. I'll stick to the point.

But you got the point, Ellie, so what is the point?

"Michael gave you those shoes," Ellie told Nina.

"I love Michael's shoes," Nina said.

"No, honey. They're Nina's shoes. Michael gave them to you, but they're Nina's shoes."

And Nina wore them every day and slept with them under her pillow at night. After a few months, they didn't fit her anymore, but Mommy let her keep them. She was a little bit surprised because even though she was only three years old, she already knew that Mommy was not a big one for keeping things around that had no useful purpose. Mommy was always throwing stuff out. But she let Nina keep the party shoes in a box in her closet even though they didn't fit anymore and one of the rhinestone circles had fallen off one of the bows and the shoes were all scratched and scuffed.

Sometimes, Nina took the shoes out of the box in the closet and looked at them. Sometimes she put them on her dolly, the big dolly that laid on her bed and was named Emily. Sometimes she put her hands in the shoes and pretended she was a unicorn and they were her magic slippers. When she was finished playing with them, she always put them back in the box in the closet. She took very good care of her magic party shoes

that Michael had given her. That was what Mommy told her. That they were magic party shoes and that Michael had given them to her.

"Can I keep them forever?" she asked Mommy.

"Oh yes," Mommy said. "Forever and always."

And sometimes, after Mommy tucked her in bed at night, Nina got up and went into her closet and took the shoes out of their box and put them in the bed with her. And then Nina went to sleep, hugging her shoes and dreaming about golden unicorns and fairy princesses and magical wizards with pointed hats and long, white beards, and other fantastic creatures, all of whom watched over her and brought her presents and touched her with their stardust.