

## *Blistered*

I closed my eyes and took his arm. Don't limp, I told myself. You're fine. I felt the back of my shoes scrape my raw heels, and my left foot squished in something wet; my feet had officially started bleeding. Another pair of shoes ruined, stained red forever.

I continued to walk, my arm looped through my friend's, partially to be close to him but mostly for support. He was talking; I was trying so hard to listen, but the screaming of my open wounds made his voice sound like white noise.

I closed my eyes again. Breathe in, breathe out. It's not so bad. They're just feet, and we're almost to the car. You're twenty years old; you can make it to the parking lot. Michigan Avenue isn't that long. Think of something else. Think of the show you just saw; think of Wynton Marsalis. Imagine the last number.

For a moment, my coaching worked, and Wynton's cool jazz blanketed my pain with sweet relief. I let the memory of his sound wash over me for one, two, six seconds. "Almost there," his trumpet tones seemed to say. The car was in sight. Keep listening to Wynton, I told myself, but within thirty steps of the car, the other voice began to scream. No, don't go there, I told myself, trying to silence the memory. Hear jazz. Hear the traffic. Hear anything else. But it was too late. The eight year old in me was awake, agitated, and determined to be heard.

"Just carry me! Please carry me. Please, please, please, please, please. Carry me. Daddy. Daddy. Carry me," I begged. Fifteen family members were in my grandparents' living room, putting on coats and saying their goodbyes, and I sat on the floor in the middle of the room, clutching my skinny, eight year old arms around my dad's leg. "Those shoes hurt. Please, please just carry me."

My aunt passed my dad and me, laughing at my tirade. "Someone sounds tired and cranky," she said, smiling at both of us. My dad joked and smiled back at her as she left the house. His smile faded as he knelt down eye level with me. His brown eyes flashed red in mine, silencing my whining. His hand encircled my ankle as he shoved my left foot into the shoe. The leather ripped at my blisters as it rubbed over my heels, and I started crying again. He repeated the process with the right foot, grabbed my arm, and lifted me to my injured feet with one hand. "Now walk," he said. My grandparents hugged me goodbye, and I limped down the street to the car.

"Wake up. We're home." I opened my eyes to see we were parked in the driveway.

Through the darkness, I could barely see the outline of the house; it seemed to be miles away, but I knew that I had to walk. One foot at a time, in the style of an old wedding processional, I limped to the front door. My family all beat me inside, rushing past me to get out of the cold and into bed. By the time my sore feet got me to the porch, it was just my dad waiting impatiently at the door. I made the last step, and he closed the screen behind me. "Go to bed. I'll be up to tuck you in," he said, and I knew what he meant.

I sat down on the rug and gently tried to pull off my leather shoes. My lace-trimmed socks were red in the back where the uncomfortable shoes had rubbed holes in my feet. I cried a little more before pulling myself up the thirteen carpeted stairs to my room. I crawled into my bed and waited.

Five seconds or minutes or hours passed before I finally heard him on the stairs. Step one: loud creak. Step two: high squeak. Step three and four: silent. Step five: crack. Step six and seven: identical soft squeaks. Steps eight through twelve became inaudible as the pounding in my heart made its way to my ears. I swallowed once, twice, and started the Lord's Prayer. I stopped after "daily bread;" I couldn't remember the rest. The sound of step thirteen was thunder in my ears. I closed my eyes and started the countdown: five, four, three, two...

He stood in my doorway. I sat stupidly in my bed. My nightlight glowed orange in the corner, and it made his eyes flash red again. The knife in his hand reflected the nightlight. My eyes were transfixed; he had brought up screwdrivers and spoons and corkscrews before but never a knife. This knife was big. I think we had cut turkey with that knife before...

"Daddy..." I heard myself say, quiet and squeaky, like step two. But it was too loud. I was being too loud. I didn't mean to say anything. I didn't mean to, but it was too late. He crossed the room quickly, wrapping his left hand around my face and squeezing. He moved his face to mine until his lips were in my ear.

"What did I say about talking? Haven't you talked enough today? Haven't you embarrassed me enough? 'Please, please, please pick me up. Daddy, daddy.' God. In front of fucking everyone." My tears fell on his hand, and he moved his hand off my face long enough to shake them off. "Do you know what happens to little girls who complain? Do you? Do you? Answer me." I shook my shoulders no. "This is what happens."

He squeezed my face again before letting go and pushing me back against the pillow. I hit my head on the slanted ceiling above me. He took a fistful of my hair, dragging me from the bed

onto the ground. A soft thud, and I landed on my back, feet raised in the air and my hands over my eyes. He grabbed my left foot, inspecting the blistered on the back of my feet, pinching and pulling the bubbles of skin. I squirmed, trying to release my foot, but I made no sound. With one hand, he jerked my leg, straightening it out, and with the other, he grasped his knife and began carving. One, two, three swipes, and the back of my left heel was now shed across my pink sheets and running up my leg. He threw the leg to the side and grabbed my other foot. Through my fingers, I saw the red in his eyes and the red on the ground, and my mind faded to black, seeking sweet relief...

"Everything alright?" I heard a voice say. I looked around. I was sitting – upright – in the car in the Michigan Avenue lot, looking down into my newly stained red shoes. "Your feet okay?" the voice asked again. I looked over to see my friend sitting next to me, his eyes softly brown. Nervous laughter escaped my lips – my twenty year old lips. "Of course," I said, without complaint. "It's just a little blood."