

LYNNE VOYCE

Los Zapatos Rojos

Analise lifts the lid of the cardboard box, pushes aside crisp, white tissue; inside a pair of red flamenco shoes; toe to heel like lovers. She had dreamt of them dancing last night - as they winged their way by courier to her grey suburban door – stamping on a polished monochrome floor; flashes of red danger and sex. She breathes in the tang of suede, replaces the tissue, looks down; these broad black brogues walk the dog; walk to the post office where she sends her grown children cheques; and walk to the off licence to buy secret bottles of wine to drown her unhappiness.

Ernestine wears stilettos: real fuck-me shoes with screwdriver heels. She'd seen them as she'd spied on Graham's office, Ernestine had got out of her car in a pencil skirt, immodest satin blouse and a pair of black patent courts that could have fuelled a million foot fetishist fantasies. Then she'd tottered to a halt to renew her lipstick. It was the lipstick Analise had found on a tissue in Graham's pocket when she took his trousers to the dry cleaners; an earthy plum colour that was really too grown up for Ernestine. What a sign of his contempt to allow himself to be caught in such hackneyed fashion.

At first, of course, was the nausea of jealousy and betrayal but then the sensual 'o' on the white tissue confronted her in unexpected ways. It was the same colour Senora Velasquez had worn when she went out for the evening. Analise remembered the rich silks and black lace of Senora's shawl, the heady scent of her sultry perfume. She could see the orange trees, heavy with ripening fruit, which dotted the Velasquez's courtyard in Seville, more easily than she could picture the potting shed and tight little borders of her own back garden.

After more than twenty-five years Senora Velasquez was dead and Senor was in a nursing home in Cadiz but the boys were still alive, with families of their own. Jose still lived in the villa and Benni a few miles south. For three years she had been '*Nannalise*' and loved them like her own. Yet, she had never returned.

She had wanted to, many times, desperately, but Graham wouldn't. "It'll be all about you won't it?" he'd say, "I don't think I could stand all that misty eyed reminiscence in a foreign language." Analise had said nothing nor gone without him. Gradually her shoes had got wider and flatter. Then there was Ernestine.

It was those killer heels, clattering across the grey tarmac outside Graham's office, that had made Analise decide about the red shoes: ruby slippers to lead her back to who she had once been.

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Analise takes off her anorak, places it on a chair at the church hall's perimeter. The deep lace skirt frills of her white polka dot dress twirl at her

brogues; she kicks them off, puts the flaming red flamenco shoes over her dark stockings, fastens the gold buckles and stands. She is instantly taller, her body an hourglass.

She walks to the centre of the parquet with the rest; some wear full regalia, some the baggy tracksuits they disguise themselves in every day. In the corner Antonio begins to play. Analise's breasts swell against the tight bodice; she picks up the hem of her skirts. "You look ridiculous," Graham would say if he were here, "You're too old, too fat for this nonsense."

"Toque de palmas!" Senora Cordoba commands, stamps her foot. The slap of claps, the fast stamp of heels crash through the church hall. The sound of the Pateneras drift in and out of the cacophony, accompanied by the hit of suburban rain on grimy windows and dull streets.

Analise twists and turns to the music, her laundry hued hands flutter above her like birds. Graham's bored, boring criticisms, outrageous betrayals flick off her: orange blossom falling from a tree. "Click, click, click." The monotone of an empty bed runs down her spine, down her moving legs, into her scarlet shoes; the loneliness seeps into the floor like a warm glass of sherry and her block heels stamp on it.

Antonio lifts his head, smiles at her. Without the guitar he is a small, grey man, hollow faced with tired eyes but when he plays he is a matador. Analise, in her new shoes, smiles back.

The careworn, mid life faces of the others, swirl into a kaleidoscope of gold combs and scarlet lipstick. And their aching, aging, redundant bodies melt into a moment of physicality. "Beautiful ladies!" shouts Senora Cordoba.

When it is over, Antonio helps Analise with her anorak. "Would you like to come to see me?" he whispers. She looks around startled. He is smiling and the rest of the church hall, abuzz with the end of the class, does not see.

"Yes, that would be nice."

"You will wear the shoes?"

"Oh yes."

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"You are an attractive woman Senora Analise." Antonio swings his legs off the sofa bed, reaches for a cigarette.

She stares at the ceiling, a sheet over her languorous nakedness, black stockinged legs reaching from the white cotton, red suede shoes just over the edge of the thin mattress. She plucks the cigarette from his fingers, takes a long drag, then lets the unaccustomed headiness suck her in as she scans the small untidy bed sit and listens for sounds of the restaurant downstairs. "Don't you have to be in work?"

“No, that is the kitchen you hear. I’m a waiter. I have another hour or so.”

“Oh.” There is quiet between them. Analise notices a stack of packed boxes in the corner, an open suitcase on top of the wardrobe, spilling shirts and ties; the walls are bare, there are no ornaments, no personal effects except for a few postcards pinned to a cork board above the kitchen cabinets. “Why are you alone?” she asks.

“I was married but she left. Never said why.”

“She just left? That’s sad.”

“Not really. We all loose things along the way.”

“I know,” Analise puts her head on his chest, “but it’s still sad.”

He kisses her.

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“Where’ve you been? I had to get something out of the freezer for dinner – it’s not on really is it?”

“No it’s not,” Analise replies coldly, “Not at all.” She looks at her husband in the harsh kitchen light, allows herself to see him clearly: sitting at the table, shoes kicked off, tie loose, shoulders round; greying, floppy hair hanging over stubbled, petulance; his indigo eyes, once penetrating, now jaded and diluted: an aging school boy. She used to find his immaturity so attractive, now it angers her. Didn’t he know that every so often she wanted to be a girl again too?

When they’d first met, after she’d returned from Spain, they’d had a funny little game: talk in baby voices, pretend to need love. It was funny because then there was enough love. Now there wasn’t.

“I mean,” he continues, not even registering her annoyance, “I’ve been at work all day – on a Saturday – and you’ve just swanned around,” he looks down, “in those ridiculous shoes.”

“I’m sorry dear,” she says and exits the room, leaving a trail of ruby sparks in her wake.

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“Passion! Temperament!” Madam Cordoba bellows, as the stamp of heels reaches frenzy. Analise is suddenly in the Andalusian jeurga that the Velasquez’s had taken her one drenchingly hot August evening while both the boys were with relatives. The wine, the guitar, the lace and frills, the rhythmic beat of the heels of the dancers’ red shoes, crystallized into a moment: the apotheosis of her youth. It was a moment that would become a talisman to protect her from the impostor that has been her life since. She

remembers the moonlit midnight shining through the open doors, the flickering candles' thumbprints on bare brick walls. And here she is now dancing to nothing but a flamenco guitar while her body finds itself again.

She feels suddenly sorry for Ernestine. To waste your soft plump youth on a pompous middle aged infidel. It was a tragedy. What will Ernestine's memories be when the inevitable happens and she grows invisible? Will they be about grey offices, staples and photocopying paper; Graham's inappropriately young aftershave and middle of the road suits; the faint whiff of polyester rather than orange blossom?

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"You danced well today," Antonio smiles, as they sit at the narrow table by the window. He has prepared tapas in earthenware ramekins from the restaurant; she notices he has made the oxtail that Senora Valasquez used to make. Analise wears her scarlet shoes.

"I enjoyed the class today. I enjoyed knowing I was coming back here."

"Won't your husband miss you?"

"He's working late. At least that's what he says. I don't care. "

There is a long pause; Antonio's face an inscrutable mask, then he reaches over, takes her hand, "Analise, I have to go away for a while. Back to Spain, my father is very ill."

"Oh."

"I will speak to you on the phone when I can."

"No, you don't have to."

"I am sorry that I cannot make you promises Analise."

She shrugs, not out of bad humour but acceptance. He had wanted her, loved her; that feeling will last, at least for a while.

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"Thank you Ladies," Madam Cordoba, claps her hands to give a sense of finality, "it's been a good terms work. I hope to see everyone back after the summer break. And thanks to Philip, who manfully stepped into the breach when Antonio left us for Spain." She gestures at the tall, serious man in the corner, who nods modestly and clings to his guitar like a life raft in a sea of amorous gazes. The assembled women clap, then disperse to put on their coats.

When Analise arrives home she sinks into Graham's armchair, a white envelope next to her. She briefly replays her and Tony's lovemaking - his

mouth against her pale skin, his hands in her hair, his legs pressed against hers - not out of melancholy but to remind herself it really happened. There are tears but she's not quite sure why: relief, probably, she had thought, not so long ago, that life had all but ended. She reaches into her jacket pocket, there is the tissue with Ernestine's lipstick on it; she had carried it around to remind her of Graham's betrayal. Now, she wipes her eyes with it, unbuckles her red flamenco shoes, kicks them off and leans back. Taking a deep breath she picks up the envelope, rips its seams deliberately and draws out a red cardboard wallet. Inside is an air ticket to Seville.

***Lynne Joyce** lives in Birmingham with her husband and two daughters where she teaches at an inner city comprehensive. Her work has won and been placed in many competitions; and can be found in anthologies and magazines. She is currently working on her first novel but keeps getting distracted by short story ideas and television comedy. This year Ink Tears Press will publish an anthology of her published work to date.*