

Ode to the Girl in the Red Shoes

She had wind-tousled hair and make-up applied with care.
Her skirt was freely moving in the gentle night air.
Six feet tall she seemed from her hips to her knees.
Only her true height those shoes did deceive.

Her ruby red platforms, with two-inch-thick soles
and their six-inch heels first caught my eye,
but then those tight shoes made her squirm from side to side
and shift her weight from shoe to shoe.

The pain on her face and the slouch in her stance
seemed to document an exquisite pain,
for those shoes were made for sitting,
not even for walking and certainly not for a dance.

They made me think of that old saying that beauty is pain.
She'd paid six hundred dollars for those stylish red shoes,
but considering her empty pocketbook
and her cursing feet, just what did she gain?

Suffering and the Life I Know Now

Red hot gut searing pain, projectile vomiting, and diarrhea doubled me over into the fetal position. Sweat mingled with the tears that dripped off my chin.

When I arrived at the emergency room, the nurses started an IV, attached EKG leads to my chest and legs, and injected a heavy dose of morphine.

STAT X-rays showed nothing, and the pain intensified in spite of the narcotic. A cardiac event had to be ruled out, so I was admitted to CICU (the cardiac intensive care unit).

To make sure I was getting the necessary treatment, a nitroglycerin patch was stuck just under the front of my left shoulder. This maneuver only added skull-busting agony that made death seem a welcome alternative to the agonies I was experiencing. Percocet, another pain killer, provided the welcome oblivion to all sensations.

I drifted in and out of fitful sleep, for every few minutes, it seemed someone came in to draw blood, to take my blood pressure, to ask how I was feeling. Machines beeped all around me as more and more uncomfortable tests seemed to be invented just for me.

What was the matter? Why couldn't the cause of so much agony be found? An alphabet of tests followed; no cardiac event was found. The agonies abated until I returned home and ate a healthy meal. Then the previous scenario repeated itself with an even greater intensity, until an elderly doctor diagnosed my gall bladder inflammation, ordered STAT emergency surgery, and declared me but fifteen minutes away from a catastrophic event, one that probably would have proved fatal. It seemed a gallstone was hidden behind the bile duct and had not been discovered by any of the tests.

I woke to a different kind of pain, that which came after half of the front of my body had been opened for the emergency surgical procedure. It seemed I had cheated death, and would

have to go through a healing period at home. I spent the next six weeks in the recovery mode, away from my job, at the mercy of the kindness of family, and welcoming the periodic doses of pain killer. After the first week, I was afraid of becoming addicted to the drugs, so I lengthened the time between doses. By the end of the second week, I was taking the prescription only every twelve hours, once in the morning and again at bedtime.

I slept, healed, worried not about anything, and learned that for the first time in a long time, I could not be everything to everyone else and nothing to myself. Considering past suffering and the life I know now, I do not feel selfish or guilty for taking time to care for myself. I realized I had always been the dutiful daughter of, student of, wife of, mother of, teacher of, and the family Ms Fix-it of everyone's trauma drama that had multiplied until I was forced to learn that whether I was all things to everyone, the sun would still come up and lightning would not strike me if I dared to say NO.

From Dust to Diamond

Though it was not my business, I was intrigued by what I thought I had just heard. I did not want to seem to be eavesdropping, but I could not help but take a seat on a nearby bus stop bench. I did not know what had transpired between them before I happened upon the elderly man and the disheveled teenager, but I was struck by what the elderly man said. “You are not dust. You are diamonds,” was what I heard him say to the grime-covered, matted hair teen-ager who was sitting on a cast-off milk crate near the Metro stop. The skinny boy’s face was scarred, his clothes tattered, and his hands were trying to protect his eyes from the glare of the sun as he glanced up at the old man, who was perched on the edge of a wooden park bench. He was the color of dark chocolate and weighed maybe a buck twenty with all of his clothes. His cottony hair formed a halo around his head and curled in ringlets over and between his ears and glasses.

As I sat on my bench and tried not to appear too obvious, the lunch hour rush of pedestrians and traffic intensified. The frantic honk and screeching brakes of a camel-colored Mercedes were followed by a woman screaming at a jaywalker who had nearly provided her new Benz with an ugly human hood ornament before it even had permanent tags. The jaywalker smiled an “I’m sorry” and hurried on across the street against the red light. The old man, the boy, and my eyes followed her as she ducked into an office building.

Then the old one said something I did not hear, but the boy shook his head “no.” This time, I clearly heard the man say that he was hungry and wondered if the boy would like to share his lunch. It was the same negative head shake reply, but I saw the wishful look on the boy’s face as he eyed the older man’s lunch—a hunk of chocolate cake, a fat ham, lettuce, and tomato sandwich wrapped in tinfoil, apple slices in a fast food restaurant’s still unopened plastic bag, and a peppermint patty. Once he had spread everything out on a napkin, at the end of his bench,

he again asked, then beckoned to, the boy, who was obviously hungry. Like a street-wise cur, the boy inched closer, still shaking his head no, as his hand tentatively reached out. Again, “You are not dust. You are diamonds,” was what I heard him say to the boy. By now, the boy was eyeing the candy, but the man held out half his sandwich and the peppermint.

Finally, the boy dared to speak. “Mister, I can’t take your food. What do you mean about my being diamonds? I can’t even afford dust, not to mention diamonds! If I could afford diamonds, do you think I’d be living out here on the streets?”

By now, I had named the man Grandfather. He was obviously concerned about this castaway child, but it was also apparent he seemed but one step away from being a castaway himself.

“Son, I see the potential for greatness in you. You are polite, your posture is erect, and you are not a nuisance beggar. What would you want to do with your life if money were no object?”

The teenager’s eyes filled with tears as he said he would like to be a doctor who ran a free clinic for the homeless, a clinic that would provide a place to bathe and to launder their clothes, a place where they would not be regarded as though they were invisible, a place where people like him could feel human. Grandfather nodded in assent, a small smile playing with the corners of his mouth. He slid toward the opposite side of his bench, pulled the napkin toward the center, and patted the opposite end as he invited the boy to have a seat. The teenager shuffled closer, eyeing Grandfather cautiously, ready to run if he sensed danger.

“Son, let me tell you a story that someone long ago shared with me. She said I was diamonds and not dust, but I did not believe her. She was my mother. We were so poor that when I returned home from school one day, I saw all of our things on the sidewalk, being picked through by human vultures. Imagine my shame at our being evicted! I began to ball my fists,

ready to fight anyone meddling with our belongings, but my mother repeated her quote about dust and diamonds. I thought she was crazy, but she said there were blessings hiding behind our temporary challenges. I couldn't see any blessings through my frustration. We lost all of our material possessions that day. Between the human vultures and the fierce thunderstorm's winds and rain that evening, there was nothing of any value left.

I let anger rule my behavior for more years than I'd like to remember, but one day, after I had reached the bottom of the ditch I'd dug my life into, I remembered my mother's words. It was almost as a revelation when the thought occurred that only through extreme pressure or hardship, could dust become a diamond. I had been dust long enough. I needed to polish my diamond—just as you will surely polish yours. You see, you already have a dream. It took me much longer to realize mine, but when I did decide to forge ahead, my life took a positive turn.

Now, I'm not by any means wealthy, but I have enough to spare and to share. My church is a couple of blocks from here. We serve the homeless, the hungry, and the spiritually adrift. I'm the sexton there, and if you are in need of anything, please don't feel ashamed to avail yourself of our help. Who knows where you or I will end up? We're only passengers on life's boat. We don't hold the tiller, but we can make the most of where we are and what we have. Do you...?"

Before I could hear the rest of what Grandfather was saying, an emergency vehicle's air horn and a nearby jackhammer simultaneously shattered the crystalline silence. When I looked again, the old man and the teenager were quietly eating a shared lunch.

My bus came, and as I boarded it, I wondered how that little vignette of lives ended. Did the teenager ever go to the church? How had the Grandfather acquired "enough to spare and to share?" What had he finally realized his dream to be? Would the teenager ever polish his dusts into diamonds? "You are not dust. You are diamonds" was what I took away with me that day.

I also started to wonder how I could turn *my* dusts in diamonds. I don't think I'll ever forget what Grandfather said to the street urchin. He saw beneath the grime and encouraged the diamonds to emerge.

It was only later that I decided to check out Grandfather's church. His offer to the teenager kept playing in my mind, and I was curious to see what his motivation was. When I got to the church, Grandfather greeted me cordially. He shared that he had won five million dollars in the lottery. He had grown up in this church and had despaired as, over time, it had become in need of repairs. With part of his winnings, he had replaced the church's roof "so when it rained outside, the church would not weep inside, and when the church needed to be comfortable for people, the heat and air conditioning would welcome them." He said his needs were simple and his wants few, for he had never forgotten losing everything. He had also set up scholarship monies where the interest would provide monies for those seeking to show that they, too, were not dust, but diamonds.