

**Winner of the Second Prize in the Adult Section**

**Two Left Shoes in Paris**

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'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' she muttered to herself as she closed the door.

It was early on a dull November morning in Paris. Her first mistake had been to ring down and ask for tea, as all that had arrived was a cream porcelain jug of water that had about as much steam rising as the Irish sea on a summer's day, a banana-yellow Lipton's teabag and an exquisite china cup embossed with tiny cherubs. No milk. No croissant. Stuff the cherubs.

Violet sighed and lumbered back to bed, placing the tray on the bedside table and gazing out at the building opposite. It had a freshly painted green wrought iron balcony with acanthus leaves frothing around in a torment. Violet liked simplicity and clean lines, not this exuberance which erupted in sensual frivolity wherever she looked in Paris.

Sinking back against the syllabub-soft pillows, she allowed herself one more sigh. She poured the water on to the sad, solitary teabag, picked up *Vogue* and flicked through the pages. Looking at fashion was a bit pointless at the moment. Violet was five months pregnant and felt like her lilac-scented grandmother who always favoured expandable elasticated waistlines.

But two days in Paris for a good friend's wedding was A BIG TREAT she told herself firmly (in capital letters). They had packed in a hurry on Thursday night and each took their brown leather overnight bags, a welcome wedding present from Violet's godmother, to work so they could catch the early evening Eurostar.

Patrick had recently joined a leading London law firm. One evening, over a rather delicious bottle of Sancerre, he told Violet that he really needed a pair of Church's shoes for work. Everyone wore them. And much as he hated uniform, he needed to fit in. His Clarks brogues didn't do the business. Only the day before he'd noticed a city broker in a suit with seams which would slice butter looking down his surprisingly inconsequential nose at them.

So he bought two identical black pairs. Traditional, responsible, a well designed classic, a secure investment – just like Patrick. Violet smiled. But last night, when Patrick unpacked in their hotel room, he discovered that he had brought two left shoes. His only other option was the battered brown sailing shoes he'd travelled in, so as soon as dawn broke, he had gone to explore around their hotel to see if he could find an alternative.

The wedding was at noon. Violet was surprised that a covering note from Clare had asked if Patrick could wear black tie. Violet presumed this was a French custom but still thought it a little odd to don evening wear for a midday affair. She had found a navy stretchy suit in Maman, a new maternity shop in Upper Brook Street, which actually looked quite chic and accommodated the tiny bony elbows and knees which

protruded from the bump every now and then. And it would contain the impossibly rich wedding lunch which was bound to follow the ceremony.

Violet reluctantly heaved herself out of bed and mooched into the bathroom. Bathroom. Now there was a misnomer. No bath. Bloody hell. Just a tiny shower tucked into the corner. Violet turned the heavy chrome dial and water gushed from the ceiling. She stepped in and turned her face up to the torrent. She forgot everything as the water surged over her, awakening every pore of her body. This was better. And the optimism continued when she spotted the Chanel body cream by the basin.

Refreshed, she almost glided back into the boudoir to get dressed. Patrick had very sweetly surprised her with maternity lingerie from Rigby and Peller and she had to admit that she felt almost feminine again clad in baby blue satin.

'Mon Dieu!' uttered Patrick as he ambled back into the room. 'Quelle belle jeune fille. Ooh la la, c'est ma femme' and ducked as Violet chucked the pot of body cream at him.

'No luck with the shoes. The only pair I found cost 400 euros and I can't justify that, so I'll just have to play the eccentric Englishman and wear my boots.'

Violet gave a wry smile. He'd look lovely anyway. She started to peer into the wardrobe.

'Could you ring down for a hairdryer, darling?' she asked and Patrick picked up the internal phone. 'And an iron as your dress shirt is still in its packet.'

His face fell as the receptionist answered his fluent French. Violet guessed the worst.

'Looks like we're playing the dotty English couple then,' she smiled.

After a lot of teasing and twisting and pulling and patting, Violet's locks looked less like a Portuguese water spaniel and more like a flatcoat retriever, but not as coiffed as she would like. Patrick had horizontal folds as well as tiny vertical pleats down his dress shirt, making him look as if he was dressed in a piece of graph paper. The grey clouds had clumped together to form an oppressive purpley-black ceiling above the city.

Patrick apologetically put his almost full-length Barbour on top of his dinner jacket.

'What a tosser,' he sighed, catching a glimpse of himself in the ornately carved mock Louis XV mirror. 'You look stunning,' he commented as his wife slipped her classic Burberry coat over her suit. 'At least one of us will pass muster. Let's get breakfast.'

The wonderful thing about being in a strange city was the anonymity. The ability to reinvent themselves. Or return to the innocence of that younger couple who met at an exhibition opening five years earlier. They sat in the window of a tiny café sipping *café au lait* and eating croissants and apricot jam. Occasionally it felt as if someone was poking a wooden coathanger through the skin of her tummy. Violet felt content.

They strolled through a tiny park, relishing the fiery autumn colours illuminated by that intense sun which comes just before rain. As tiny drops started to fall, the couple grabbed each other's hands and ran towards the English church.

The groom, Antoine, stood at the door with Clare's brother Jack behind him. Jack looked relieved to see them.

'Thank God for that,' he muttered to Patrick. 'At least you're not going to kiss me. I've been kissed by every single one of Antoine's relations. Male and female. It's been horrible.'

Jack was a down-to-earth Geordie who owned a smokery near Hexham and had never before been kissed by a man and did not expect to start at his sister's wedding.

'Hey, Vi, you've got a bit of a ladder in your tights,' he shouted after them as they walked into the church, and then realising that that wasn't the most helpful thing to say, added 'But you look smashing.'

Violet experienced a sharp pang as she twisted round to look. An enormous rip snaked, no erupted, from the hem of her suit all the way down her calf and continued to explode. Tights. She had left the spare pair in the hotel bedroom. Bigger. Nothing for it but to pretend she hadn't noticed and get on with the wedding.

They were ushered to the third pew as honoured guests who had travelled across the Channel to support Clare. As Violet looked around she couldn't see anyone else in a dinner jacket apart from Antoine and Jack. Oh God, it looked as if they were trying much too hard. And failing miserably.

The organ suddenly sang forth and everyone stood up. Clare appeared at the door with the winter sun behind her, a graceful bough of palest pink apple blossom. Tall and serene, she drifted down the aisle on her naval father's arm. Violet caught the captain's eye as he passed and he gave her a surreptitious wink. Violet flashed him a smile. Ever the charmer, she thought. Violet forgot her tights and Patrick's shoes, her wild hair and his crumpled shirt, and felt an unexpected pricking of tears at the back of her eyes.

Without warning she was back in the school chapel outside Bath where she and Patrick made their vows three years earlier. She remembered that feeling of absolute rightness at the entrance and the tangible swell of support from all their friends and family. Violet was brought painfully back to the present by Patrick who was frantically digging his fingernails into her arm, while jabbing at the order of service with his free hand.

A ripple of dread gathered force inside her. The next hymn was 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling', played most recently at the desolate funeral of Patrick's oldest schoolfriend, Oliver, who had been knocked off his bicycle on the way to the House of Commons. Oliver was a political reporter tipped to be the editor of a daily newspaper. But all that was over now. And Patrick missed him fiercely. As the opening notes soared skywards, Violet saw a tear start to inch down Patrick's profile.

'Put on your sunglasses,' she whispered, clutching his hand as if she was pulling him back from the edge of a precipice, 'Then you can hide a bit.'

Patrick rummaged in the pockets of his Barbour and gratefully disappeared behind his Raybans. Only a few people in the pews behind seemed to be whispering.

The rest of the service passed in a fuzzy muddle of prayers, vows and more singing. The vicar's breathy voice crept towards the final amen like an ancient Labrador wheezing its way towards its supper dish. Finally it was over. Antoine and Clare were man and wife.

Violet and Patrick sat on in the pew until everyone had left the church, feeling as if they had just weathered an apocalyptic storm, battered, bruised, with that heavy yet empty feeling of exhaustion that often follows sorrow.

Slumped back against the rigidly unforgiving pew back, Patrick took off his Raybans, extracted a large checked handkerchief from his pocket and placed it over his whole face. Violet continued to hold his hand, empathetically, affectionately but ultimately helplessly. She knew that no one could replace the friend with whom he had built childhood dams and dens and camps. No one could replace the friend with whom, as a teenager, he co-owned an ancient, temperamental brown Mini Clubman with mushrooms growing on the wooden window-frames. No one could replace the friend who was the first to know that Violet was really special.

And then the handkerchief began to quiver. To twitch. And to shake. With rising panic, Violet flicked it off Patrick's face and saw, to her astonishment, that he was laughing. This time tears of relentless mirth cascaded down his cheeks.

'I've just realised,' he spluttered, wiping his eyes, and subsiding into throaty chuckles.

'Realised what?' Violet asked, somewhat perplexed.

'To the rest of the guests, I must be Clare's spurned lover. The mad Englishman who turns up in a DJ and a Barbour and then bursts into tears in a hymn about love. Oh God, how funny. Come on Vi, after this fiasco, we need some champagne.'

And Violet stood up, realising that although it was certainly turning out to be a very long day, it was also going to be a memorable day. A day which was happy. And sad. And funny. A really full day. A day that celebrated life even as you mourned the loss of it. A day of new beginnings. And she walked off to congratulate Clare on her marriage and laugh about her tights.