

Kaleidoscope

Cleo picked up her glove and wiped a hole in the steam blurring her view out of the coffee shop window. She peered down into the street below. A jigsaw pattern of wet umbrellas shielded the scurrying shoppers from the rain. Red ones, green ones, striped ones and flowered ones; some old, some new, some no doubt borrowed and some the obligatory blue, all jostled and hurried on their way along the city pavements. Puddles were forming, gutters streaming. She looked down at her feet. At least her orthopaedic lace-ups would not be out of place in today's weather but she still yearned for her pink stilettos, her high heeled patent leather boots. Would she ever be able to walk in them again?

'Ready to go?' Anthony had returned from the toilets upstairs while she was gazing out of the window.

She nodded and eased herself to her feet as he handed her the crutches.

'Want a hand to get upstairs to the loo?'

'No, I'm fine. And it's too much of a struggle.'

'Sure you can make it to the bus station? I can go and look for a taxi if you like.'

'You'll never get one in this weather.'

He hovered anxiously as she negotiated her way through the tables. Her crutches caught on badly draped jackets and nudged against bulging bags. Was it really worth the effort? She had been looking forward so much to getting out of the flat but this meeting with Anthony had been a sad disappointment. Her sense of gloom deepened as she reached the street level and felt the first drops of the steady downpour on her unprotected head. There was no way she could hold up a colourful umbrella even if she'd had one. Her grey mackintosh reflected her mood.

'Here, let me put that hood up for you.'

Dear Anthony. He was thoughtful and caring but she had finally realised that the spark they once shared had dwindled to nothing. He would be her friend always. He would see her safely on the bus, but she would never again ask him to join her in the little semi-basement that was once a love nest, now a prison.

It was still raining as she stared out the window of her flat. The viewing of feet passing at street level had become a ritual. A pair of walking shoes over thick socks stopped at the gate into the area. Hairy legs and the hem of baggy shorts appeared on the short flight of steps down. She heard something pushed through her letterbox – no doubt junk mail - and watched enviously as the feet bounced up the steps again. A basement was not the best place for a cripple like herself to live but she was not going to give it up. She was determined to go on climbing the steps to the street above no matter how long it took. Some days she had to haul herself up by the handrail but at least she felt she'd achieved something. She sat to attention in her chair as a pair of aquamarine stilettos strode past supporting tight leopard-skin trousers. That could have been her once. Then two small orange welly-boots danced by under a frilly dress, accompanied by a pair of very large Doc Martin's. A smart black leather boot sidestepped a puddle. A pair of muddy trainers immediately jumped into it and splashed an identical pair of the latest fashion statement for boys. But the rain was easing. When the sun came out the pavement steamed. The next door cat found light and warmth at the top of the basement steps and joined in Cleo's observation of passers by.

As the light began to fade a feeling of panic began to take over. Watching was becoming more than a habit. It was almost an addiction. She needed her daily fix of footwear and now she could barely see out of the window. There was a dark spot in the street lighting outside and soon she had to strain to see anything at all. It was late and few people were passing. *Don't worry Cleo, she told herself, you have your secret stash, your own cupboard full of drugs. Leave it until later. Go and get something to eat. The longer you wait the better it will be.*

Cleo put her book away and finished tidying up her small kitchen. Then she went back into her bed-sitting room. It was dark and silent outside. The street lights had switched themselves off. Now was the time for her solitary assignation. She switched on all the lights in the room and swung herself over to where a chair faced a large wardrobe. She hooked one of her crutches around the handle and pulled open one door and then the other. There in front of her were shelves and shelves of shoes: jewelled sandals, sparkling high heels, glossy brown ankle boots, blue peep-toes, red platform soles, yellow deck shoes. She picked out an emerald green court shoe with a four inch heel. She caressed the smooth glistening leather. Turning her head she could see her darlings reflected in the dark of the window. They were all around her. She was embraced by shoes.