

**A Woman's Right to Shoes
by Marian Keyes**



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Marian Keyes was born in Limerick in 1963. Since she was first published in 1995, she has become one of the biggest selling Irish writers of all time. Her seven novels, Watermelon,

Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married, Rachel's Holiday, Last Chance Saloon, Sushi for Beginners, Angels and The Other Side of the Story have become international bestsellers, published in twenty-nine languages, selling nine million copies along with three of them becoming movies for TV and general release. Marian includes among her hobbies, reading, movies, shoes, handbags and M&Ms, and now lives in Dún Laoghaire with her husband Tony.

A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO SHOES: MARIAN KEYES

THIN MORNING LIGHT, grey pavement, counting forty-eight seconds from the front door to the end of my road. Turn onto bigger road and start again, counting seventy-eight seconds before the traffic lights. Across the road in thirteen, then counting twenty-nine to the shops.

I've only started this counting lark lately – just in the last few weeks. But now I do it all the time, I count everything. It's very handy, it stops me from going mad.

As I got nearer the pub, I wondered if my silver sandal would still be outside. Probably. Because who would want it? Mind you, there was no accounting for pissed people. They took big orange traffic cones home, why not a single, silver sandal?

Nearer I got and nearer; there was something there alright and it was the right size for a shoe. But already I knew it wasn't mine. Alerted by some instinct, already I knew something strange was happening. And sure enough, once I was close enough, I saw that my sandal was gone – and, as if by alchemy, shimmering in its place was a different shoe, a man's shoe. It was astonishingly beautiful: a classic brogue shape, but in an intense purple leather. It sat on the grey pavement, looking almost like it was floating and it seemed to throb, as if it was the only thing of colour in a black and white world. Slightly mesmerised, I picked it up and turned it over. There were no scuffs on the sole, like it had never been worn. Butter-soft, biscuit-coloured leather lined the insides and it made my aching eyes feel better just to look at it.

Should I bring it to the police station? It looked important enough. But it was a shoe, a single shoe. Lost by a man who'd had one alcopop too many last night. I'd be cautioned for wasting police time.

Perhaps I should put up a sign saying it had been found – if it was a puppy or a kitten people would and shoes were beloved also. Next door to the pub was the newsagents with its noticeboard of ads. I could post something there: 'Found: One magical shoe.' Then I remembered the last time I'd placed an ad there about shoes. Look at where that had landed me.

But this shoe was too beautiful to abandon. Quickly I gathered it up, wrapped it in my scarf, put it in my bag and hurried to work.

The previous night.

Yes, perhaps wearing a single high, silver sandal mid-November smacked a little of histrionics. But it was necessary for people to know I was making a statement, a protest, even.

As I had walked to the pub I'd plumped for practicality and worn an old pair of trainers - pre - Hayley trainers that for some reason I had kept, even though I had thought those days were long gone – but just before I entered into the bright, convivial warmth, I took them off and replaced them with a single spindly sandal on my right foot. On my left foot – the shoe-free one – my tights had a hole in the toe. I regarded it steadily. So be it. I couldn't falter now.

Listing to one side, I stood just inside the door – were they here? Not yet. This was good, I could settle myself for maximum impact. There were many sofas – this was a lady-friendly pub – but I required elevation and visibility. I hopped onto the bar and climbed up onto a stool, then I rotated so that I was facing into the room. You couldn't have missed me or – more importantly – my uneven feet, one shod, one bare.

My eyes were doing that constantly-scudding-swimming- fish thing that very dislocated people do and I counted between events (people coming in, people lighting cigarettes, people gently moving a strand of their girlfriend's hair out of her eyes etc; I started back at zero each new time.) In between the counting, I drank steadily. The plan had been to stick to mineral water, but somehow, between the ongoing, world-dislocating shock and my proximity to strong drink, that fell apart. All evening, I sat, my back rigid with righteousness, waiting for them to appear, but they didn't. This was very annoying. How else could I shame them?

Nick, the barman, though clearly a little bit alarmed by my behaviour, was kind. Unlike Naomi, a mutual friend of mine and Steven's who said, "Alice, please put some proper shoes on, this whole thing, it's just so undignified."

Undignified? Me? I was dignity personified, as much as anyone can be in one sandal and one betighted foot in mid-November. In an attempt to defuse me, Naomi tried subsuming me into her group of sofa-based friends, but I refused to abandon my post.

Around eleven o'clock, I gave up; they weren't coming. I hadn't known for sure they would, the real world isn't like Coronation Street. But they had been sighted there together. Which was very tactless, considering Steven and I used to go there. Not every night, maybe only once or twice a week and as much for food as for drink. (Salmon fishcakes, pacific-rim salads, mocha bread-and-butter pudding, etc. Like I said, a lady-friendly pub.)

As I left, I see-sawed across the pub – now quite crowded, which was unfortunate because my great shoe imbalance was not as instantly visible as I would have wished. Indeed, I feared that several people simply dismissed my side-to-side swaying as the result of inebriation. I was aware of general nudgery as I limped past. I even heard someone say, "So she's pissed, so what? After what's happened, who'd blame her?"

Only when I got through the doors and out into the street did I retrieve my trainers from my bag and take the sandal off. I was going to put the sandal back into the bag, and then I thought, But why bother? What use is it to me now?

So I left it. Exactly mid-way across the two doors (well, as mid-way as I could manage after an evening of grim, heavy drinking.)

I nursed a vague plan that I might do the same the next night with a different shoe. And every night thereafter, until all thirty-one of my shoes were gone. Just over a month, it would take.

How I met Hayley.

Most people are unbalanced. Or asymmetrical, as it's more commonly called; my problem area is my feet: my right foot is a size four and my left a size five. I used to get round the

problem by buying shoes in a size five and employing insoles, but it wasn't always a great solution, especially if the objects of my desire were sling-backs or open-toed, minxy stuff.

However, one day I was visited with a brilliant, life-changing idea: if I had a size-four right foot and a size-five left foot, could there be someone in the metropolis I lived in who had a size five right-foot and a size four left-foot. My pedi mirror image. If we could only find each other, we could buy two identical pairs, one in size four, one in size five – and divvy them up according to our needs.

I considered advertising in Time Out or a national newspaper, but in the end I placed an ad on the noticeboard in the local newsagent – and got a reply! A local girl, she lived less than ten minutes walk from me and Steven.

I was wild with excitement before I met her, charmed by the idea of symbiosis, and the thought that this woman would complete me.

I am quite freakishly short and therefore fond of high heelage. (Sometimes when I step out of my four-inch heels, people look around in confusion and ask, "Where's she gone?" and I am obliged to call out, "I'm down here.") Hayley, by contrast, was tall and slender. I feared she would spurn high-heelage and embrace flattage, and unfortunately, most of the time, she did. Right from the start it was a battle of wills and our shared asymmetry didn't kick-start a friendship. From time to time we bumped into each other locally, but we only ever arranged to meet on a 'Need to Buy' basis. Which we did for over two years: in March, when the fresh sandals crop hit the shops and September, when the new boots arrived. There were also occasional unscheduled events – the need for glittery Christmas party shoes or just a random spotting of a beautiful pair, which it would have been criminal to pass up.

Sometimes Hayley was game and agreed to the purchase of sky-scraper heels, which made me happy. Even at the best of times, though, it was never as much fun as I'd expected.

In fact, it was slightly uneasy. But I pretended it wasn't. We were girls! We were shopping for shoes! We had a special bond!

The bottom line was that Hayley was horrible. An important life lesson for me, and one I'd learnt too late – just because someone loves shoes doesn't necessarily mean she's a good person.

When Steven told me he was leaving me for her, the shock plunged me into a grey-tinged nightmare. It was then that I began counting. I even found myself doing it in my dreams, because as soon as I stopped, the panic rose steadily until it threatened to choke me.

There was worse to come. Two days later I came home from work to find that all my size-five shoes had been stolen. Hayley had taken them. I was left with thirty-one single right-foot shoes. The only complete pairs I had left were the boots I stood up in and a manky pair of ancient trainers.

Popular psychology has it that when a person undergoes a trauma – a mugging or perhaps an abandonment – they often respond by thinking they're worthless. As it happened, I hadn't got around to it yet. But Hayley had – even though the trauma was mine. In her eyes, I had

become utterly insignificant; after helping herself to my husband, she felt she could take anything else she wanted.

Apparently, she had decided that actually, her feet were suddenly the same size. After a lifetime of one size four and one size five, both her feet were now a size five. An unbelievable turnabout? Well, why not? Was it any more incredible than Steven's defection, after he'd once promised that he'd always love, so much so that he'd married me. (I'd had the shoes – white satin pumps – made specially; for once both my feet were perfectly shod.)

I rang them to ask for my shoes back. Hayley told me to stop harassing them. I said I just wanted the return of my shoes. Hayley said they'd get a barring order.

Deflated as I was, I knew I was in the right. But all that remained to me was the moral high-ground. I decided I would wear a succession of single shoes to the local pub in the hope of shaming them publicly.

That evening, after work, when I emerged from the underground, I was expecting to see photocopied flyers stuck to the lamp-posts. Big bold type asking, Have You Seen This Shoe? Then a blurry photocopy – or an artist's impression even – of the magical purple shoe. 'Last seen on my foot on the 17th of November. Reward offered.'

But there was nothing. Didn't anyone care?

I would have cooked dinner, except I didn't bother eating anymore. I counted my way through three soaps until it was time to go to the pub. Tonight I chose a brown suede boot. Then I wrapped the magic shoe in a soft old pashmina – I was glad to get some use from it, it had cost a fortune and four seconds after I'd bought it, it had plummeted out of fashion.

Nick's face fell as I hopped through the pub to the same stool I'd sat on the previous night. I was an embarrassment. Well, tough. I unwrapped the purple shoe, like I was revealing a valuable artefact, and asked if he had any idea who it might belong to. No, he said, but he agreed that it was a magnificent-looking shoe and he was very taken with the Cinderella overtones. "You're like Prince Charming. When you find the bloke who owns the shoe, maybe you'll fall in love."

I looked at him scornfully. "This is no fairy-story. And why," I wanted to know, "do men always think that a new man is the solution to women's problems?"

"Sorry," he said quietly, taking the shoe and placing it in a position of high visibility behind the bar. There it remained for the entire evening, but no-one claimed it.

I counted my way through every man who came in, my eyes going straight to their feet, as I sought that special man in one shimmering purple shoe and one besocked foot. But nothing.

Nor was there any sign of Steven and Hayley. When I was leaving, I left my brown boot in the street. Then I went home and slept with the purple shoe on my pillow. It wasn't the first

time I'd slept with a shoe, but it had never been someone else's before. It seemed to glow in the dark, filling the room with a benign violet light.

The next morning, on my way to work, I wondered if my abandoned boot would be replaced by another purple shoe, I'd half-expected it to be like the elves and the shoemakers – a new shoe every day. But this time there was nothing except an empty cigarette box and that didn't count.

Days passed and I brought the purple shoe everywhere. I felt edgy (ok, edgier) without it and sometimes, when even the counting wasn't working, I took it out of my bag and touched it to my face and, amazingly, it calmed me down. One night I had a dreadful scare when I couldn't find it in my bag to put on my pillow. I was deeply unsettled without it. But when I woke in the morning, it was on my bedroom carpet, twinkling at me as it always did, like a puppy happy to see me. Now, how had that happened? Magic? Or simple muddlement brought about by a surfeit of alcohol? I didn't care, I was massively relieved and hugged the shoe to me.

Mind you, now and then I caught a glimpse of my behaviour, as seen from the outside, and wondered about it. But I'd had my husband stolen and all my left-foot shoes stolen. If I was a little unhinged, who could blame me?

Every night I went to the pub, sat on a stool, and watched for one-shoed men. Every night I wore one shoe and left it behind when I went home. Although I had left nine shoes on nine different nights there had been no sightings of Hayley and Steven.

One night I arrived at the pub to find Nick bubbling over with excitement. "I have your Cinderella," he hissed. "He was here the night before you found the shoe. And he's the kind of bloke who'd have a cool shoe like that." He jerked his head discreetly. "It's him over there."

I looked and immediately I knew this wasn't our man. This one was too good-looking. Wasn't it traditional to make approaches to the ugly sisters first?

However, we went through the motions and actually, he wasn't even nice about it. He seemed baffled when I withdrew the purple shoe from my bag, then he looked at my feet, at the shiny black stiletto on one foot and the big toe poking through the hole in the tights on the other. (Yes, all my tights had developed holes.) Fear scooted across his face; he suspected he was being set-up, that he was the subject of a big, shoe-based leg-pull and that the whole pub was in on it. "That's not my shoe." He dropped eye-contact, then moved away as fast as anyone can in Oliver Sweeney Chelsea boots. Seconds later, he left.

Nick and I exchanged a look. "It was worth a try," I said, then Nick went back to polishing glasses and I resumed counting and drinking.

"Give me another look at it," Nick asked later.
"Remind me of the brand name again."

I unfolded the pashmina and purpleness blazed around the bar-counter. Nick and I shared another meaningful look.

I knew what he was thinking: normal non-magical shoes don't behave that way.

The brand name was picked out in gold-leaf on the leather insole. Merlotti.

"I'll look it up on the internet," Nick said.

"No point," I said. I'd already googled the brand and got nothing...

Suddenly a voice behind me cut into our conversation.

"Excuse me," it said, "But that's my shoe!"

What happens next? Over to you...