

VANESSA FARNSWORTH

The Plaid Shoes

“I WANT THOSE SHOES.”

“They’re plaid. Worse, they’re day-glo plaid.”

“Yes, I know. I want them.”

“Why?”

“Because they’ll go well with my electric blue wig.”

“What electric blue wig?”

“The one I’m going to buy when the chemo causes my hair to fall out.”

“Why blue? You’d look better as a blonde.”

“Blue goes with the glass beads I’m going to decorate the bathtub with.”

“We don’t have a bathtub.”

“But we will. And I’m going to decorate it with glass beads. Blue ones.”



Claire’s husband knew when he was beat. It was clear this conversation wasn’t going to enter the realm of the rational anytime soon, so the shoes went in the box and the box went in the house. And that’s how a pair of plaid shoes became Claire’s constant companion for the duration of her cancer treatment.

She wore them everywhere she went—everywhere being the house, the garden, the doctor’s office, the hospital, and little else. It’s not that Claire was too sick to go other places—not in the beginning anyway—she was just too depressed and too afraid to lose another moment of her life to mundane things like shopping or cleaning or banking. From that point on, her life would be devoted to her obsessions.

One of those obsessions was her garden. Claire didn't care that her new shoes tracked up the carpets every time she trudged into the living-room at the end of an afternoon spent toiling in the mud. The way she had it figured, someone who wasn't her was going to have to clean up the mess when she was gone. While she was still here, Claire was going to live her life the way that best suited her, without always thinking about how things would look to her husband or the neighbours or strangers who'd know her for a glimpse then continue on with their no doubt long and fruitful lives.

Why shouldn't she live this way?

Her life had been hijacked by a disease that had no right taking root in her body. She was thirty-seven years old with no family history of breast cancer. She wasn't on hormone replacement therapy (and resented the mammogram technician's question), she ate only organic foods—most of which she grew herself—and she'd long ago thrown away her deodorant for fear of what it might contain.

This shouldn't be happening, but since it was, she was going to find freedom in it, even if that freedom came in the form of two plaid shoes.



Those shoes were on Claire's feet the day she made a discovery in her garden. She was thinning old canes from the raspberry patch when she noticed a small cloth bundle nestled between two of the more robust plants. She plucked it from its resting place and peeled open its folds to discover an oblong chunk of clear glass.

A quartz crystal.

As its identity solidified, she sat down cross-legged in the garden, turning the crystal over in her hands. Its appearance was unexceptional. It had six sides—and they were smooth and straight as though cut by a laser. The sides turned at abrupt forty-five degree angles and joined to form a point at one end. The other end was scratched and hacked as though whomever removed it from its birthplace had used a pipe cutter or hatchet or some other equally unsuitable tool.

Either that or the crystal was incomplete.

Nature had changed its mind three-quarters of the way through its creation and had wandered off to work on a particularly challenging cloud formation or a new species of pine and had forgotten to return to its partially formed child.

Claire scanned her garden, the neighbour's yard, the street out front. There was nothing to indicate how this crystal came to be stashed in her

raspberry patch—not that she expected there would be. Possibly there'd been footprints, but since she was now sitting where those would've been, there wasn't much chance they'd be intact or even recognizable.

It didn't matter.

If the true owner of the crystal wanted it back, he or she would have to beg. And she'd be ruthless. She'd lie and say she hadn't seen it, ask what right they had to be on her property, call them names. To hell with ethics, that'd only mildly concerned Claire when she had a future. Now that she had more hair than future—blue though it may be—she had no intention of abiding by any rules that she herself hadn't put in place.

Claire's logic was simple: the crystal was meant for her. Anything nature had abandoned mid-creation was the perfect companion for someone nature had screwed over for no better reason than it didn't feel like expending another ounce of energy on her life, not when there was some cool new thing it could do with a wave that the surfers would just love.

Fine, fuck it. Let nature skip off to Hawaii if that's what it wanted to do. Claire was determined to forsake nature and its inexplicable whims. Instead she was going to put her faith in this crystal in the hopes that it might contain some death-defying magic that her body could channel into immortality.

Claire looked down at her plaid shoes and found them glowing up at her. They were now several shades brighter than they'd been an hour ago when she hosed off all the mud. This meant something. Maybe it meant they approved of the crystal or maybe it was Claire's moral downswing they approved of. She wasn't so good at reading her shoes' emotions yet. That would come with time. For now, the shoes looked happy and that filled her with a joy that was as irrational as it was euphoric.

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“Did you hear what I just said?”

“No.”

“Then I'll repeat it. You're responding well to your treatments. There's no change in the prognosis, but it looks like we've bought you some time. Why are you looking at the blood pressure cuff like that?”

“I'm willing it to change into an elephant's trunk.”

“Are you being successful?”

“Clearly, no. But I don't see why I shouldn't try.”

“I see. Should I be concerned about your mental state?”

“You never have been before and it hasn't changed much. I'm just verbalising my thoughts instead of keeping them to myself. You should try

it sometime; it's really quite liberating. Besides, you're the one who suggested I use visualisation as a means of fighting my cancer. If it applies to a disease, I don't see any reason why it can't apply to concrete objects."

"I can think of several."

"Well, keep them to yourself. I've had enough reality for one lifetime. You haven't mentioned my shoes."

"They're very bright."

"Thank you. I think so, too."

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The crystal has been sitting on the window ledge above the kitchen sink since the day Claire found it. It likes to eyeball her as she makes the reams of pasta or peanut butter sandwiches that have become her dietary staples. She used to eat other things, but food no longer bears any relation to the nutrients it can offer. It's all about comfort now and pasta and peanut butter give Claire far more comfort than the broccoli and onions which are supposed to be cancer's worst enemies.

Claire looks down, then returns her eyes to the jar of raspberry jam.

There's no denying she's packing on the pounds, but it's not like it really matters. Who in their right mind would want to fuck a one-breasted woman? Not her husband, that's for sure. And anyone who finds the idea pleasing is probably some freak who masturbates to thoughts of animal brutality, so she feels justified in blimping out to an unholy extreme.

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"You're not listening to me, are you?"

"Am too. You were describing the exact size of the universe and I'm fascinated—really I am—but I have to continue practising astral-projecting my soul into another dimension or I'm never going to get it figured out in time."

"We can discuss something else, if you'd prefer."

"No, I like talking about the universe. I just wish it didn't have to have an exact size, that's all. I find it more comforting to think of it as infinite."

"Well, I can't make it infinite if that's not what it is. Would it help if I told you that this is just one of several universes and that within each one there are ten dimensions, possibly more?"

"Is that true?"

"It's a theory. Actually, it may be a couple of theories I'm splicing together on the fly, but there's nothing to say it couldn't be true."

"That's why I love you."

"Enough to stop astral-projecting for five seconds and carry on a normal conversation?"

"Only if you say something nice about my shoes."



Claire is feeling disconnected. Conversations seem to be happening in mid-air and she doesn't know how to interact with the people spawning them. She used to think that everything in the universe was connected, that everyone she met was in some way a part of her, but recently that's been changing. Claire doesn't think she's connected to anything but her own psychology anymore.

That's it.

She's all alone except for her plaid shoes and her new-found crystal. Oh yes, and her thoughts. But none of those are likely to survive the transition. She won't even survive it, at least not the part of her that seems like all of her. Maybe there's another part of her that will. That's the part she's trying with everything she's got to send away.

But it won't go.

Worse, Claire thinks the crystal is jealous of her shoes. Her plaid companions get to go with her everywhere while the crystal is left to bask in the sunlight on the window sill. You'd think it'd be content to be someplace a heck of a lot warmer and drier than the raspberry patch, but evidently it has high standards.

Claire would've thought the crystal was smarter than that. She would've thought it was capable of understanding that eventually it'd be abandoned and so would the shoes. Sooner or later, she was going to abandon everything, including herself.



"What happens next?"

"Next, you die."

"But what does that mean?"

"It means the part of you that's mortal falls away so that the part of you that's everlasting can live on."

"What part of me is that, exactly? I mean, I've been trying to reduce myself to just that for the longest time, but I'm not sure I'm being successful. How do I know?"

"You'll know."

"When will I know? When I die? That's not good enough. I need to know now."

"That's the problem. When you stop needing to know, the answer will come to you."

"For thirty-seven years I didn't want to know and no answer ever came to me."

"That's because you weren't looking for the answer back then."

"Is this a riddle? Because I'm not in the mood for riddles."

"No, although I can understand why it might seem that way."

"So then what I'm to take from this non-riddle is that I can't find the answer without first seeking it, but once I start seeking it, I won't find it until I stop looking for it. Have I got that about right?"

"Pretty much. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm mentally transforming you into a purple platypus with orange antlers and a donkey's bray."

"Is that helping?"

"Immeasurably."



Fear has a colour and that colour is white. Fitting, Claire thinks, since white is a conglomeration of all other colours and fear is an all-inclusive sort of a thing. It's this clear, pervasive white that she sees whenever she closes her eyes, especially at night when it invades her senses and short-circuits her dreams. She didn't used to see it, she's almost certain of that. She's haunted by the idea that when she used to close her eyes, she'd see black or swirls of colour that would eventually give way to the transitory images of fantasy. Somewhere that all changed, but it happened so slowly that Claire didn't notice until all of a sudden she did and she has no way of going back to compare then with now.

What interests Claire most about all this white is that she read somewhere that a white light is what you see when you die. At least, those who've come back have been spreading that rumour and something about it reads true. So every time Claire closes her eyes, she's immersed in the colour of death and it occurs to her that one day soon she's going to close her eyes and that white will be everything that she is going to see and feel and hear forever unless she can vault her soul into another dimension, which is turning out to be much harder than she ever imagined.

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“Let go.”

“I’m trying, but it won’t let go of me.”

“Let go.”

“How can I when it’s the only thing I’ve ever known?”

“Let go.”

“If I let go, what do I embrace instead?”

“Let go.”

“You keep saying that, but you’re not telling me how. Just tell me how.”

“Let go.”

“You let go! Better yet, turn a different colour. I’m tired of all this white. I want maroon. Give me an ocean of boring, muted maroon and then we’ll continue this conversation, but not before.”

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The sunlight is white as it shines through the kitchen window and hits the edge of the crystal, but by the time it heads out the other side, the crystal has transformed it into a rainbow that gets more intricate the closer Claire looks. Her shoes can’t do that and it occurs to Claire that the crystal is capable of doing something her shoes can’t. Either that or it’s employing a cheap trick to steal her attention away from her shoes.

It picked a good way to do it.

The sneakers are Claire’s solace, that’s true. But the crystal may very well be her salvation. If it can break white light into its component colours—and clearly it can—then what can it do against death?

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“Slay it.”

“You can’t. No one can.”

“Not death itself, but the fear of it.”

“That’s not what I asked you. Your answer’s misleading.”

“So’s your question. It’s not death that’s your problem, it’s fear.”

“Fuck you, you’re just a crystal. Why should I listen to you?”

“You shouldn’t, but you are, so you might as well hear what I have to say.”

“About slaying fear? Fine, I could use a laugh.”

“It doesn’t exist.”

“If I feel it, it exists.”

“That’s your problem. Your feelings aren’t what you think they are. They’re a trap, a trick. Your fear doesn’t exist anymore than you do.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m here all right, you can hardly make the case that I am dreaming my entire existence.”

“No, but I can make the case that someone else is dreaming your entire existence. Can you say for certain that isn’t true?”



Claire wraps the crystal in its original cloth and returns it to the raspberry patch that very same day. She still doesn’t know where it came from or how it came to be posited amongst the canes, but she does know that nothing it said to her was genuine. It wanted to steal her attention away from the plaid shoes and knew that tapping into her fear was the best way—the only way—to do it.

Bad move.

Claire won’t be manipulated by the festering lies of an inanimate object. No wonder nature wandered off mid-way through its creation. It knew a bad egg when it saw one and wasn’t about to waste its time finishing something that would ultimately be of no use to the world. Better to set a new species of beetle in motion or heave a tectonic plate into a more stable position.

On a happier note, Claire’s shoes continue to offer her solace. They are shining up at her now as she makes herself her third peanut butter sandwich of the morning and in silence they are admiring her knife technique. That’s the brilliance of these shoes. They know that conversation is no more a comfort to Claire than thoughts of her impending death. And they know that the best way to fulfil their function as her one and only true friend is to sit silently at the end of her legs and shine up at her with a joy that eclipses the fear and the white and the reminder of what lies hidden in the raspberries.