

The Best of Bugged – chosen August 23rd

The Wrong Sort of Shoes
Jenn Ashworth

Overheard in the Sharoe Green Maternity Unit, Preston. Two midwives, talking in the stairwell: 'I didn't expect someone like her to have shoes like that. It was a shock. Do you know what I mean?'

The newspapers said she wasn't right in the head. Nonsense. There's nothing more normal than a woman feeling like life's passing her by unless she's had kiddies of her own.

And the security in here's a joke. Two doors, one camera and a buzzer you push to get in during visiting. Us midwives have swipe cards but in an emergency there's a spot you kick on the left side and it's usually enough to jiggle the mechanism. That's a secret we let the new ones in on after they've done their probation. A reward for getting through the first six weeks – the night shifts, the stillborns, other people's mother in laws.

We take turns, sitting on that desk by the front door and buzzing the visitors in. One woman came just as I was leaving my spot.

'You'll not get much of a visit now,' I say.

I knew the sister in charge – kicks everyone out the second the little hand touches the half hour. The rules is the rules.

'Are you sure?' she says to me. Posher than we usually get.

They got me to describe her, later on. A raincoat. A folded broolly dripping onto the laminate. The raincoat was a soft fawn colour, the same as her wet-blond hair and her puddly, empty eyes. Only special thing about her was her shoes. Six inch heels, shiny gold straps. If she had a car she certainly wasn't driving it herself. So she had a man. Nice for her.

It might have been the rain on her face that made me think she was crying, but I felt sorry for her. She didn't look the type to be breaking into cabinets and pocketing the diamorphine, so I thought it would be all right.

'Leave it an hour,' I said, 'till Sister's gone home. Give it until eight. There's a spot here and if you knock it with your foot,' I showed her, 'it pops open.'

She stared at my feet as I was doing it. They're very strict about the sort of shoes we wear. I go to Clarks myself. What you lose in fashionability you make up for in price, durability and comfort and you can quote me on that – but that's by-the-by.

'Get your lady to draw the curtain round. You'll be all right for half an hour,' I said.

The woman smiled at me and went on her way. I carried on with the discharges and felt pleased. I put myself in her shoes – glad she'd not come out in the rain for nothing. I went off shift myself, shortly afterwards. Home to a Marks and Sparks ready meal and a docu-drama about Susan Boyle. I went on the internet and ordered her CD. Bed before eleven because I was on an early the next day.

The sound was something to remember. One of them wakes up, takes a peep into the crib. It's empty. They'd sliced her open to get her baby out and we'd never heard a peep out of her but this morning you could hear the screaming as far as oncology – even some of the cardio nurses came running along the corridor to see what was up. And this is maternity, mind – they're used to the noise of screaming coming from down here.

It was a girl, if I remember right. The police were there within the hour but there was no trace. Unprecedented, the papers said. Got to be an inside job.

I never saw that woman again but they played the securi-cam footage of us in court during the inquiry. I wore my other shoes to court – a brown coloured court shoe, funnily enough, with a low chunky heel that's wide enough to be comfortable walking, but not so wide it looks matronly. I had a blue two piece and my mother's pearls and while you can't say I looked like a movie-star, everything was clean and paid-for and I think I turned out all right.

The thing is, I'd have said, if they'd have given me chance, it's these women – desperate for kiddies of their own, who'd make the best mothers. Some of them have been collecting tiny clothes for years, decades even, by the time their change comes along. And compare that to the sort we get – teenagers screaming for me to bring them a bottle of formula so they've got time to put their makeup on before their feller turns up. You know the sort.

The mother of the missing child had another one the year after – she was young enough. Security's tighter now. Visitors have to sign in, sign out, have their names and faces checked against a list.

They never found her but I like to think the woman in the gold shoes has a house somewhere in the countryside. Big old place, and it's not empty any more. So many kiddies she doesn't know what to do with herself. Her happiness overflowing. I get a bit of it, second hand. Warms me when I think of her.

I had to leave. My last day, I open the locker to change my shoes and what's in there but the most expensive, shiniest looking pair of heels I've seen in my life. I'm not the kind to wear things like this – they're dancing and dinner shoes. Dating shoes. Nights out on the town shoes. Impractical. Couldn't hoik a baby into this world or keep a woman out of the next, wearing shoes like this. They were siren red – we all know what that means.

I put them on, walked out of the ward and into the rainy car park for the last time, smiling.

Secret
Jennifer Copley

He puts on my bra. Two women whispering
while I queued behind them at Keith's.
The eye-bones of chops winked at me
but it wasn't funny –

brought back memories of a man I'd loved
who wanted to wear my pants in bed,
the elastic cutting into his stomach and thighs.
Buy some of those French things, he'd said.

When he left, the bed smelt of Poison
which I never wear. I found eyelash curlers
in a drawer, a pair of crimson high heels
squashed under the wardrobe.

Who was I to talk?
At work, gyrating round my pole
in just a thong, I was forbidden to look
at customers unless I licked my lips first.

I never told him about my job.
He thought I worked night-shift wrapping
cold meats for the deli – lie laid upon lie
as thinly sliced as German sausage.

Neighbours
Alison Brackenbury

Dear God, they are not friendly here
Until, at start of summer
Bees hum each sedum cluster
The first skies fruit and hover
As dusk is nearly over
They unclip gates, they murmur
'She lived in Tewkesbury, beside the river'.