

**Your mother must be
very worried about you.**

IMAGE BY ERIK-ODIIN

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NO SHOES BY LEAH GRACE O'BRIEN

The sound of a hollering train some miles away woke me. We had spent the night in an abandoned parking lot. I rolled over, groaning, my wet skin stuck to the vinyl seat. My eyes felt as if they were glued together from the melted mascara left on.

I looked out the window and saw Dallas in the distance.

I checked the girls in the front seat to see if they were still sleeping. Maribel stirred in the driver's seat. Cyndie woke and turned away from the glaring sun.

"What time is it?" she asked with a yawn.

"I don't know. Early. We should look for some food."

"Maybe we ought to find that soup kitchen downtown. I seen a church with a bunch of people out front. They weren't no holy rollers. I'm guessing thays looking for food," she said.

"We should check it out," I replied, pulling an old tank top over my head. I opened the car door and stepped onto the hot pavement. I looked down at my feet. I had lost my boots a few States back and had been walking around barefoot. My soles were black and hardened. There were blisters forming along the sides of my feet. I was going to have to find myself some shoes, but first we needed to find something to eat.

We woke Maribel and rolled on out of the edge of town towards a hope that downtown would promise us some food. The old church was easy to find due to the long line of vagabonds wrapped around the corner and down the street.

We parked the car and added ourselves to the end of the line. The morning heat persecuted the people in line as they waited, sweating in their tattered street garb. The line moved slowly.

An old black lady in front of me tinkered with her watch. "Excuse me, ma'am, do you have the time?" I asked.

She tried shielding the sun from her eyes. "Mmm. Hmmm. My watch ain't workin all that well, but I think it's about eight o'clock. They be getting ready to serve in a little while," she said giving me the once-over.

"Do we have to wait in this line? It's too hot and I feel like I am going to throw up," Maribel groaned as she sat down on the dirty sidewalk.

"What other line is there? We need to eat. We have at least three more days before we reach California. We aren't going to make it on an empty stomach," I shot back. "Or an empty gas tank," Cyndie said with a grin.

The minutes felt like hours. Beggars fanned themselves with newspapers.

Suddenly, there was a creaking as the doors on the side of the church opened up. We entered a large room that was warm and faintly lit by sunrays streaming in through stained-glass windows.

I grabbed a paper plate. The smell of fried eggs and hash coming from the kitchen made my mouth water.

I was stopped by an old woman in an apron. She wore pointy glasses like in old photographs of the grandmother I never met.

"Where do you think you're going with those feet of yours? We do not allow bare feet in this church," the lady said. I recoiled as her words came out like hot sauce. I looked down at my feet. I shifted uncomfortably and tried to say something but my throat felt like sandpaper.

I took a step and they fell off.

“Do you want a pair of shoes?” she thundered. People looked up from their breakfast. This made for good morning drama.

“Uhhh, yeah.” I muttered.

“Was that a yes?”

I nodded. “All right then,” she said, hands on her hips, her white apron with nary a stain on it. “Come with me and we will see about getting you some shoes.” She grabbed my plate and set it down on a nearby counter top and whisked me away before I could say anything.

I followed her to another wing of the church, far away from tables and breakfast. White-washed walls echoed with the sounds of clanking pots and pans from the kitchen. We moved to another room and the sounds were muffled.

The old woman took me over towards a pile of cardboard boxes filled with clothes. “Let’s see here...” She rummaged through a few boxes and pulled out a large pair of men’s sneakers. She held them up and squinted. “Come here and try these on.”

I was beyond the point of embarrassment. I sat down on a pew and put one old blue sneaker on my right foot. I let out a sigh. “Put the other one on,” she commanded. I put the other sneaker on and stood up. I took a step and they fell off.

Looking over at the other boxes, I assumed there must be more shoes to choose from but beggars can’t be choosers. I was not about to ask for another pair. I looked at the lady with a half-smile. “Thank you,” I said glumly.

She put her hands on her hips and studied me. “There are plenty of people in this world who would do just about anything for those shoes.”

“I know. I appreciate you helping me,” I said. I felt dizzy and hot.

“Go get yourself some breakfast and say a prayer.” Shaking her head, she added, “Your mother must be very worried about you. She would be very upset if she saw you in this state.”

I bit my lip and stood there for a moment, as if pondering a deep philosophical question. “Hmmm,” was all I said, and I made my way back to the breakfast tables.

I found my friends and sat down. I reached for a cup of coffee and paused, looking down at my shoes. I smiled and took sip of the coffee.



LEAH GRACE O'BRIEN

For as long as I can remember I have always felt compelled to write. Both Kerouac and Fante's work influenced my decision to leave home at a young age and travel across the country. No Shoes is a narrative essay that I wrote about traveling in the Deep South at the age of 17. I wrote the story as a way to convey the freedom I felt, as well as the harsh reality of living on the streets. My hope is that this piece resonates with those who have struggled with homelessness and the uncertainty of an unknown future. I am living in New Orleans after travelling in South America for the past five years. New Orleans has inspired me to keep writing. There is a strong sense of place here. I am active in local poetry slams and attend as many literary events as possible. My hope is to write about my travels in a way that is both genuine and compelling.

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