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The Shoe Queen

Anna Davis

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THE FANCY-DRESS THEME WAS REFUSE AND WASTE PAPER. Genevieve Shelby King's kingfisher-blue dress was all patched over with pages from old literary journals. Her blue silk dancing slippers were embroidered with fragments of poems and tipped with bows made from sonnets. She was one big mass of poetry.

Handing her fur to the man by the door, Genevieve entered the marble-floored hall on the arm of her best friend, Lulu. Count Etienne de Frémont's grand house was all dressed up like his guests. High above their heads, suspended on invisible wires from the ceiling hung a selection of bicycle wheels, empty bottles and ancient boots.

'It's very Dada,' said Lulu.

'Dada was over years ago,' said Genevieve. 'Why didn't someone tell Violet de Frémont?' And they swept through to the party, leaving Genevieve's husband Robert back in the hallway, fumbling for change to tip the coat man and muttering under his breath. It was often this way – the girls whispering and giggling together, scheming and sharing secrets, while Robert followed behind.

In the ballroom, they hovered by an enormous collage of old theatre programmes, sipping champagne and getting their measure of the room. The chandeliers had been removed for the evening and replaced by crazy garbage copies of themselves made from a million glittering fragments of coloured glass. Genevieve's gaze moved swiftly over the room to spot her many rivals – the daughters, wives, lovers and darlings of Parisian culture, American shipping, Italian motor-car manufacture and English blueblood. The refuse theme, as it turned out, was an interesting leveller. The Princesse Martignac was hung with an assortment of buttons in place of the family diamonds, and looked less than happy about it. The famously exquisite Harriet Dupont looked – well – bottleshaped in her shiny-green-bottle dress.

Genevieve, while not entirely satisfied that her costume was more glamorous than anyone else's, nevertheless perceived that sheer, bold confidence might

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give her the chance to out-dazzle the pack. They're feeling small, she thought. Take away the finery and they're nothing.

'Everybody's here,' said Lulu, nodding in the direction of Ernest Hemingway, who was dressed entirely in brown paper. Tristan Tzara and Francis Picabia were used métro tickets; Paul Poiret was a bizarre multi-coloured tangle of fabric – was he a piece of carpet fluff? A fur-ball? 'Of course, nobody can afford not to be, or Violet will stop the money for their next little exhibition or journal or show.'

Genevieve frowned. 'Where is Violet? I can't see her.'

The band was striking up a Charleston and couples moved out across the sprung dance-floor, bird-stepping and flapping their arms.

'Come on, Vivi, let's find some pretty boys to dance with.' Lulu's dress was covered in shiny sweet papers. Her earrings and necklace were strung sweets, which sparkled in the glow of the garbage chandeliers as she headed off into the crowd without looking back. Perhaps there was one woman in this room capable of competing with Genevieve . . .

'Ah, there you are.' Robert was dressed in a silver suit that was supposed to look like a trashcan. He'd refused to wear his 'lid', thereby rendering the costume unidentifiable. 'Great party, isn't it? Say, isn't that Harry Mortimer over there? In the newspaper suit? Looks kind of like a fish supper.'

But Genevieve wasn't looking at the man in the newspaper suit. She was watching Lulu dancing with two men at once. The short one was the painter Joseph Lazarus, a longterm admirer of Lulu's. The other, taller man, wearing a cream suit, was someone she hadn't seen before. She would certainly have remembered him. He had a broad, handsome face, somewhat in the classical Greek style.

'Is it Harry, do you think?' Robert was still peering off into the far corner.

Genevieve seized his arm. 'Come on. Let's dance.'

'Oh, honey. You know I don't like to.' Gently, he removed her hand. 'Listen, I'm going to say hello to Harry. Why don't you go on and dance with your friends? I'll be just over there.'

'If that's what you want.' Genevieve pursed her lips in irritation. 'There are men who'd kill to dance with me, you know.'

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'Chérie!' Lulu was shimmying wildly with the tall man in the cream suit.

Genevieve allowed Joseph Lazarus to take her hands and draw her close. Even as she began kick-stepping with Lazarus, her gaze was fixed on Lulu and the tall man.

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'Isn't she a marvel?' Lazarus was dressed like a waiter, and Genevieve wasn't entirely sure whether this was a costume or merely his terrible fashion sense. 'Look at the way she moves. She's an empress. She should be in that fresco.' He pointed at the ceiling overhead. Genevieve glanced up at jackal-headed men among pyramids and palm fronds. Men with enormous eyes standing sideways on. Lulu's eyes were enormous too, and surrounded by a layer of thick black kohl that was certainly reminiscent of Ancient Egypt.

'Ladies and gentlemen.' The band-leader lowered his trumpet. 'As I'm sure you've noticed, we have in our midst that spectacular cabaret star, the most painted and photographed woman in the whole of Paris – Lulu of Montparnasse! Hey, Lulu, let's have you up here. Come on, girl, give us a song.'

And before he'd even finished speaking, Lulu was up there on the stage, saying something to the pianist, who nodded. Turning to face the room, she announced:

'This is a song about Paris. It's a special time, my friends, in this most amazing of cities. And 1925 will be the most amazing year of them all. The song is called, "C'est Nous Qui Avons de la Chance". In English, that's "We Are the Lucky Ones".'

Her voice, when she began to sing, was fine silk thrown over broken glass – covering but not truly concealing it. The words blurred together; you couldn't make them out, but it was the voice that counted. Its pain, in spite of the cheery song title. It was the heartache in the big eyes that counted – belying the smile on the red lips, the frivolity of the painted-on beauty spot.

Genevieve was holding out her glass for a champagne refill and looking around for Robert when a deep, American voice just by her ear said:

'What's that supposed to be, do you think? An egg or a head?'

It was the man in the cream suit. He pointed at the Brancusi bronze atop its plinth.

'It's an egg that looks like a head that looks like an egg that looks like a head,' said Genevieve. He really was very handsome, this man. Broad shoulders, the nicest kind.

'You say that with such authority. Perhaps it's the English accent.'

'I have it from Violet. But that's just my précis. Her version took a good twenty minutes.' She showed her surprise at the lack of recognition on his face. 'Violet? The Countess de Frémont?' And then, when he continued blank, 'Our divine hostess. Were you actually invited to this party, Mr . . .'

'Monteray. Guy Monteray. And no, I wasn't. Not directly. I'm the guest of a guest.'

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'I see.' She wanted to ask him who he was here with, but drew back. Tried once more to spot Robert.

'This is my first time in Paris,' said the man. 'I'm fresh off the boat. Practically a virgin.'

She sipped her wine and looked at him sidelong. 'I'm Genevieve Shelby King.' She tried his name on her tongue. It had a familiar sound to it. 'Are you a poet?'

The whitest of smiles. 'Would you like to dance, Miss Shelby King?'

'Mrs.'

'Oh.' The smile flickered for a moment. 'I do apologize. Where's your husband? Is he here?'

She gestured vaguely. 'He'll be over there somewhere. He doesn't dance.'

'Pity.'

'Yes,' said Genevieve. 'Yes, it is.'

Robert puffed on a cigar, sipped his bourbon and watched his wife dancing with an incredibly tall, broad-shouldered man in a cream suit. 'Fellow's like a skyscraper.'

'What a sharp observation.' The speaker was so insubstantial that Robert hadn't even noticed him. 'Mind if I borrow it?'

Robert's head was a little swimmy with the bourbon. He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. 'Borrow it?' He frowned, puzzled. 'They're only words. Don't belong to me any more than they do to you.'

'A dangerous point of view, that one.' A soft voice. A narrow face with glittering eyes and a high colour in the cheeks. 'If there were many people who spoke that way, well, what would become of us?'

'Us?' Robert watched the skyscraper man lift his wife clean off the floor before setting her down again and spinning her about. He made it look so effortless.

'Us low-down scribbling types who make commodities of words. Not to mention literature. You don't remember me, do you, Robert?'

The fug in his head was thickening. 'You're a friend of my wife's, aren't you?' It was a safe bet. Everyone was a friend of Genevieve's. That was how it had been ever since they'd settled in Paris two years ago – ever since she'd taken up with that Lulu creature. He did his best to accept the situation. If you marry a woman as beautiful, clever, outgoing and thoroughly modern-

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thinking as Genevieve, you can't expect to hide her away at home. You might as well ask a bird not to fly. But sometimes, just sometimes, he wished he could.

'Norman Betterson. A friend of Genevieve's and a recipient of your great generosity, sir.' His smile was almost manic. 'The magazine?' he added, by way of explanation.

Magazine . . . Robert groped about in his memory.

'The work's starting to dribble in now. I already have stories from Hemingway and Scott. And poetry from Gertrude Stein. I expect to have enough material to go to press in another month or two.' The fellow broke off at this point and erupted into a coughing fit which made him bend double.

'Are you OK?' asked Robert.

'Oh, don't worry about me.' He dabbed at his mouth with a large white handkerchief. 'I have five years to live. Plenty of time for you to make good on your investment.'

'Right. Of course.' Dry-mouthed, Robert smacked his empty glass down on a little table. He would have to speak to Genevieve. She was susceptible to men like this – men with fancy ideas and poetic aspirations in need of a few quick dollars. He hoped to God that it was only a few dollars . . . Wasn't her fault – not exactly. Trouble was, she had dreams of her own. Dreams of becoming a poet. Her literary ambitions made her easy to exploit. And increasingly her vulnerability was rendering him vulnerable too. What would his daddy have to say about this if he was still alive?

He tried for another glimpse of her on the dance-floor, but couldn't see her.

'Your wife –' the eyes were glittering fiercely – 'is the most beautiful woman in Paris. She's got that aristocratic British thing, hasn't she? Like a racehorse. A real thoroughbred. You're a lucky man. Oh, don't look like that, Robert! I'm not saying she looks like a horse. Far from it. I—'

She had vanished. And so had the skyscraper man.

'Excuse me.' Robert straightened his jacket and cleared his throat. 'I must go and find—'

The man – Betterson, or whatever his name was – was already wandering away.

Robert wished nobody but himself could see Genevieve's beauty – its full, powerful dazzle. He liked to think that he was the only man who really knew her. He was ninety per cent sure he did. Or maybe ninety-five. There was just the tiniest bit of doubt in him, and he couldn't work out what it was all about.

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At the moment when Robert set down his glass and began to search for Genevieve, she was standing with Lulu over by the Brancusi sculpture. A waiter on stilts came teetering by with a tray of canapés, all of them coloured green, and the girls raised their eyebrows in bemusement. Even if they'd wanted a snack, they'd never have been able to reach the tray.

'Well, that's about the stupidest thing I've ever seen,' said Genevieve. 'Must have been Violet's idea.'

'She's a singularly stupid woman,' said Lulu.

'But not so stupid that she can't throw the best party of the year. How could I possibly compete with this?'

Lulu flapped a dismissive hand. 'Oh, chérie. Don't even bother thinking about Violet de Frémont. She's nothing. Violet's trying to buy her way in but she can't get at the real Paris.'

'So what about me? Am I a part of the real Paris?'

'Ah, chérie. Stick with your friend Lulu and you won't go wrong. Live your life at night-time in the 6th, where Violet de Frémont is nothing but a tourist. The rich are mere consumers here. The real Paris is about the art that's in your heart and your mind.' She winked. 'Anyway, tell me about Guy Monteray.'

'You seem to know more about him than I do.'

'Come on, Vivi. You know what I'm talking about.'

'Do I?'

'I saw the way you were looking at each other.'

'Window-shopping, that's all.'

'If you say so.' But her face still wore that expression – suggestive, mischievous.

'Stop it!'

'Stop what?' But now the mischief was evolving into something approaching sympathy. 'Oh Vivi, this insistence on the sanctity of your marriage – it's sweet but ultimately . . .'

'Ultimately what?'

'Unrealistic.' The smallest sigh.

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Genevieve pursed her lips and scanned the room again. 'So where's Camby tonight?' Lulu was in love with the renowned photographer Frederick Camby. Had been for years.

'How should I know? The man's a fool.' No discernible emotion from behind the make-up mask.

'There's Norman Betterson.' Genevieve touched Lulu's arm. 'I need a word with him. I gave him some of my poems to read a while ago, and . . .' But the sentence was left unfinished. She'd caught sight of something unmissable. A pair of shoes . . .

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