

A toast to the sole

I was a bit tempted to title this piece “The Big Truth about Small things.” But I dared not, because my version of the truth may not be as big as you would anticipate and I would then feel even smaller than I really am. Then again, it can be summed up in this somewhat playfully mysterious premise – what happens when a runaway imagination encounters a static pair of abandoned sandals. On one of my recent evening perambulations – which are pleasantly aimless and provide me the opportunity to observe the endlessly amusing antics of my fellow bipeds, my eyes alighted on a pair of ladies’ sandals ignobly abandoned right where the pavement levelled down for the entrance to a lane. That they were ladies’ sandals was a particular cause for concern. Goons shedding their footwear when escaping after an interrupted theft, or drunks too plastered after a tipping binge as to bother if their feet are shod or not – these I can understand. But a pair of women’s sandals carelessly abandoned, as if in a moment of great desperation, seems to hint at some dark, Chekhovian tale involving a young, beautiful, but foolishly naive protagonist and her life of chaotic turmoil. A little description is in order here. The sandals in question were cheap, of a sickly dark maroon colour, with thick, ungainly single straps and a shiny buckle on each. The heels were worn out and there were deep indentations of the wearer’s toes on the fake leather and that awoke in me a sharp twinge of pity for the unknown woman. Perhaps she was one of the countless young lasses who arrive in this city every day, seeking a job, a mate, a way out of their old lives, old privations. I did not want to wonder if she might have been abducted by car borne hoods at this very spot some recent, menacing night. Nor did I care to imagine she let go of her slippers in the abandonment of grief, possibly after a lover’s betrayal. I would instead, prefer to comfort myself with the probability that she gave in to her vanity, that she had impulsively bought a pretty, new pair from a nearby shop, and euphoric at the sight of her feet so pretty in the new sandals, just plonked her old, ungainly ones on the road. Perhaps her tastes are evolving, as is her ability to earn better wages. Perhaps all there was to it was that these muddy slippers, all ghastly maroon and tarnished buckles, marked a woman’s reaching for the stars? I shall never know, of course. I only wish it were true.

I’ve decided I’m not going to be an old fashioned fuddy duddy and be sweepingly dismissive of today’s mall culture. Malls have definitely helped us be smarter. Instead of falling for the salesman’s glib flattery – “Your complexion suits all colours, Madam”, we are learning to make our own choices, patiently rifling through a trillion hangers to find the one *kurti* or *sari* that defines who we are or want to be seen as. But even in malls, when it comes to shoes, you still need salesmen to help you try them on. When the shoe salesman slips your chosen footwear onto your feet, he also expects you to walk up and down in them along the length of the shop to see they don’t pinch, you feel at home in them et cetera. I suspect they secretly enjoy the prank of making you toe the line. Everytime I try on new shoes under the supervision of these encouraging sales folk, I feel as I am walking for the first time in my life – gingerly, self consciously, wobbling a little, feeling surer after every step, then, raring to go. This is one of the last, old shopping rituals that looks like its going to stay. Oh no, they are not going to do away with shoe salesman yet, because wouldn’t we then all try on the new shoes and just walk away with them? And what’s worse, leave behind heaps of beat up, worn out, muddy, smelly shoes?

What is it with shoes and women? I should, of course, have long been able to figure it out, considering I am myself a card-carrying member of this enigmatic species. But then, even women mystify each other. While everybody from Beyonce to the most obscure wannabe model from say, Jhumritalaya buy shoes as if they have as many limbs as a freaking octopus, I myself have no patience to focus so much on the lower extremities, when there are so many ways to amuse oneself with one’s brain. I also have a healthy aversion to high heels and believe that tottering around on them, just with the hope that someone will admire this acquired height, is the very kind of feather brained stuff we women have to get rid of if we are to be head and shoulders above others in the cerebral and meaningful sense of the term. Forgive me for that preachy patch. Don’t know where it came from. All right, all right, away with this tall, high brow posturing, and out with the bare truth. I frankly cannot afford to have a shoe fetish, and all those Jimmy Choos and Louboutins, the Blahniks and Ferragamos are never going to find their way into my humble shoe rack. There, I’ve said it.

Those of you who have young children will know the feeling when you see your toddler venture forth into the world in his first pair of squeaky shoes. His squeaks intrigue him, he only has a vague idea where they are coming from and he stamps about delightedly like a demented little troll. Shoes do figure a lot in children’s literature. Think Puss in Boots. If you scoff at an overly virtuous person as Miss Goody Two Shoes, you can trace the phrase to the eponymous children’s story, a variation of the Cinderella one. The Cinderella story seemed illogical the moment it was read to me as a child. I am not claiming to have been precocious but, I thought, if there were specific, well demarcated shoe sizes, wouldn’t Cinderella’s glass slipper fit hundreds of others? Why then did the author say that it didn’t fit anyone else? And didn’t the lovelorn prince have nothing else to do but check out a shoe size? What kind of a ruler would this self-obsessed royal make? I could imagine indignant and rebellious subjects finally marching to the palace and giving him a George Bush and Suresh Kalmadi kind of shoe treatment.

Hemingway's image is that of a grizzly bear of a man, the ultimate macho hero driving an ambulance in the war, fishing, hunting, delighting in blood sports like bullfights. Even his prose is male – pared down, shorn of all superfluity, tough, so that you can reach right down to the elemental things. Legend has it that Hemingway entered a bet with a couple of his drinking buddies that he could write an entire short story in six words. And true to his word, he came up with this six word story, considered the shortest complete short story ever. It goes like this “For sale; Baby shoes; Never used.” Everything is implied here – a man, a woman, and a baby which did not survive to wear the new shoes. It is a theme of loss, as well as the inevitability of having to move on.

My favourite poet, Maya Angelou named her fifth in the series of memoirs as *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. In the mid Sixties, Angelou spent time in Ghana, discovering the country of her ancestors. The turbulent time of the civil rights movement is vividly captured here and she speaks movingly about the plight of the people forced to leave their homes. Travelling shoes here is a metaphor for the grit and endurance that people must have when facing and opposing injustice and exile.

The popular culture of Hollywood has memorable shoe links too – Charlie Chaplin chomping through his boots, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers tap dancing as if their shoes had a life of their own, not to speak of Sharon Stone's *femme fatale* stilettos. Like people, shoes too have personalities. They can be sturdy and dependable, boring or intriguing, utilitarian or creative, sensible or flighty and frivolous. And like people, shoes too have stories to tell, and carry in them the dust and weariness of the distances they have travelled. No one perceived this better than the anguished genius of Vincent Van Gogh, who painted several pairs of shoes with his intuitive understanding and compassion. He lavished as much attention on humble, beat up, unlaced farmer's boots as on a beautiful landscape. These paintings speak of his finding beauty in everyday things and not taking them for granted.

In Indian art, you cannot allude to shoes without referring to the legendary Maqbool Fida Hussain and his quirky habit of not wearing them. One of the late maestro's closest lady friends writes of his strange sartorial tastes, especially during his early phase, donning clothes so flamboyant and outlandish that people just crowded around him to make some sense of it. Hussain may have gone barefoot as a gimmick or it was his way of protesting against the elitist club which once denied him entry as he was not wearing proper shoes, or he may have genuinely wished to connect to the earth beneath.

Our shoes define the person we are and there are as many kinds of shoes as there are people. It is hard to imagine a brutal prison guard's hob-nailed boots, used to kick helpless, unarmed people, and a ballerina's tiny, velvet pointe shoes placed together. And contentment is perhaps all about being comfortable in our shoes, knowing who we are, with all our strengths and limitations, and accepting, maybe even forgiving ourselves. In the end, I'd say we do need shoes every step of the way, but we should also remember to steal away now and then, kick off our shoes to run barefoot in the grass, or wriggle our toes in a dreaming pond, among the reeds and darting, silvery fish. That, I reckon, would be really good for the sole, er, I mean soul.

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