

# *The Day of the Shoes*

By Lisa McMann

This day begins like all other January Sundays; swirling snow seeps through cracks in doors, children stir from their benches and, one by one, they pad down the aisle barefoot toward the glowing sign above the double doors. Even though the sign says “EXIT,” the little ones know it means ‘bathroom’. A careless coat zipper clicks against a wooden bench, echoing like a stone dropped in a quiet pool.

In the dark of the morning, the stained-glass windows are shades of black set deep inside grey stone walls. More than an hour will pass before sunrise, but this old church begins to buzz with activity. On the altar, next to a sad assortment of shoes, is a row of makeshift beds holding tiny babies who cry in waves. The pastor lets the people keep the altar lights on when it’s very cold—the lights dry the shoes and warm the babies. In a Philadelphia winter, it’s cold enough to need the lights on every night.

Pew by pew they awaken, stiff-shouldered inside their coats. Gloria is the first one up. She is in charge when Christopher is gone. She stretches her aching back and reaches up toward the cathedral ceiling where bejeweled chandeliers hang from hardwood rafters, as they have done for a hundred years. Gingerly she walks over cold tile to the narthex windows so she can survey the weather. Resting on the mat in front of the arched oak door is a thin line of snow, like cocaine on a black glass plate.

Outside, wind gusts drive snow and litter down the sidewalk. Newspapers and plastic bags slap and stick to the rusty schoolyard fence across the street. Shadowy figures, like lumpy bags of trash, sit motionless in the school’s doorway.

Gloria shivers and catches her reflection in the glass. She is thin, unsmiling. Her weathered skin, at 29, looks 40. She pulls her tangled hair away from her face to make a ponytail, takes a rubber band from her wrist and snaps it in place. It’s time to go.

Gloria shakes her daughters awake. She needs their help. They are not excited to be up; they grumble and shove each other, but Gloria raises her hand and silences them with a look, and they get busy packing their bags and herding stray children.

Gloria takes her duties seriously—if she messes up, thirty-five people lose shelter. This is her job. It earns her and her girls a guaranteed warm place to sleep and meals from the Sandwich People, who leave packages on the church steps twice a week.

Gloria gathers the adults and older children in a circle before she passes out the bread. She bows her head and they follow suit; some kneel. “Oh God,” she says. Someone begins to hum. “God, we thank you for this shelter in your house.” Choruses of ‘mmm-hmm’ follow.

“Ohhh-oh-oh-woahohhhh God,” she lifts her voice in song, and several others join her. The beat is provided by cracked hands on a brown bench, the echoes of broken people rise high into the rafters, as dawn breaks on what they will come to know as the day of the shoes.

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Christopher is on a speaking tour in Michigan today. His car, a 1992 Ford Tempo, runs loud and rough. The roads are slippery with snow. When he arrives at the chapel ten minutes late, the band is wailing. He hurries inside, an odd portrait: scruffy blonde beard, dreadlocks, black frame glasses held together with tape. He wears a heavy wool sweater with holes in the elbows; a green flannel shirt shows through. Someone shoves a production detail sheet in his hands and points out his cue. Christopher gives the tech team a wide grin and a thumbs-up signal.

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As the homeless folk pack their belongings and wrap their babies tightly, Gloria stands by the door and checks bags and pockets, searching diligently for stolen church items. It would only take one incident to get them evicted, and Gloria is willing to accept the glares from the few who resent this ritual, if it gives them all one more warm night.

Within an hour the church is empty, save Gloria and her girls. The girls crawl down the aisles, looking for whatever might have been left behind, knowing they won't find anything. When everything you own fits in a bag, you can tell with a glance if something is missing.

Gloria runs the vacuum sweeper through the sanctuary in the dark, her well-trained eyes seeking crumbs of bread, threads, lint. She finds a button and puts it in her pocket. It looks like it belongs to Harald Montraine's coat. She hopes it's not the top one.

The girls wipe down the pews with wet paper towels and Lysol, provided by the church. They work pleasantly now, knowing that the alternative is to be standing outside.

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Christopher peruses the modern chapel, wondering where to sit. Purple cloth theater seats accompany speakers and electronic equipment, which hang from the catwalk and ceiling. Contemporary paintings of Old Testament Judges adorn the walls. The band is dressed for comfort. He finds an empty seat near the front, takes off his sweater, and blends his voice with the voices of the church. He raises his hands to take the blessings of the day, offered by God to all who ask.

He prays for Gloria and her daughters, and for his homeless friends who share the church pews with him back in Philly. He prays for their feet in broken shoes, knowing that plastic bread bags worn like socks might keep their feet dry, but do nothing for the cold. He prays for inspiration and rejuvenation—this is his last stop. He is anxious to go home.

Christopher raises his head when the pastor mentions him, and he turns to look at the crowd. His eyes dart from face to face, resting now and then on those who look back at him. He is surprised to see such an eclectic group—so many teenage and college faces, from preppy to grunge to punk—hair in all shades of green and blue, facial piercings like nails in drywall. In the back sit the suits and dresses, uncomfortably adorning the bodies of former hippies and Woodstockers, he guesses. They stand out like tuxedos at a beach party, but their high-school

aged children splay gangly legs and arms over the pews like they belong.

Back in the sound booth, a techie rolls a scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus sits with Scout on the porch swing and talks about walking a mile in another person's shoes, wearing the skin of another to understand his perspective. When the movie clip ends, Christopher stands and walks slowly up the steps to the podium, barefoot.

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Gloria and her girls hit the streets well before the first church volunteers show up. They make their way through the rundown neighborhood, weaving between brown buildings and black-cruled piles of snow. If they can reach the YWCA by 10 a.m., they might get a shower and a break from the cold. It's a three-mile walk.

Gloria's oldest daughter, Martha, is fourteen. She has a yeast infection from too-tight pants and chafing underwear, and God knows what else. The youngest, Penny, is eleven, and started her period for the first time yesterday. This news brings no emotion. It is news alone; it is news inevitable. Gloria cannot stop her girls from growing up. She cannot protect them from men who coddle or fondle or force themselves on little girls, just as she cannot stop the girls from offering themselves to men, open-legged, as she herself did at age thirteen. Now the last of her babies is ripe for carrying babies of her own. Gloria rearranges the church altar in her mind, wondering how she'll fit more infant beds there.

The women lean against the brick wall of the Y as they wait in line to enter. Martha squirms in her jeans, an anguished look on her face, but says nothing. Gloria gives her a sympathetic half-smile and begins loosening the braids in Penny's hair. Selene, the middle daughter, works on Martha's. Selene's own hair is cropped short, her head nearly shaved bald by her drunken father who had custody of Selene two months ago. Selene had come home from school with a lice note, disallowing her to return until she was nit-free. That was enough to set her daddy off, and Selene ran away, back to her homeless home that night.

The line at the Y moves slowly; by noon they have made it inside the building. Gloria fishes two quarters, a dime and three nickels from a pouch inside her shirt. “Pay if you can, what you can,” the sign says. She lays the coins in the basket.

There is a nurse in the locker room, a volunteer, once a month. Gloria sends Martha to her for Monistat, and Penny follows to ask about menstrual pads. Gloria grabs four dingy towels and sets up a space for her family. “You go, Selene. Wash out your underwear and toss it to me first, then wash your body,” she says. “Drink some water. Don’t waste soap.”

While the girls take showers, Gloria, dries their underwear with the wall-mounted hand dryer, pushing the silver button every thirty seconds to start it again. She inspects the generous box of feminine products, sets a pad on top of Penny’s dry underwear, and thinks about Christopher.

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Christopher clears his throat and surveys the crowded room from the podium. He sees potential. Current and future bankers, nurses, builders, electricians, factory workers, attorneys, and teachers sit attentively in front of him, taking in his unusual dress, his dreadlocks, his bare feet. His words are soft and slow as he begins telling them his story.

“I am driven to be homeless,” he says.

“After six years of higher education, a master’s degree in business, and thirteen years as a mortgage officer and president of my own company, I have almost nothing to my name, and I blame God.”

People shift in their seats.

“God ruined me, you see. Ruined my perfect life. I had it all. I fulfilled my dreams, I had money in the bank, I had plans to retire at age 45 and live a life of leisure. My life was perfect.”

Children glance at parents.

“Does that make you uncomfortable? I hope so. Because I want God to ruin your life,

too. It's only then that you can make a real difference in this challenging world.

“At the height of my business career, I thrived on stress, and walked the streets of Philadelphia like I owned them. As I achieved my goals, I praised my amazing self for my tremendous abilities. I was a god to myself.

“And then one beautiful night I decided to walk home after work. As I passed the subway stairs, I saw a street man beating the hell out of a woman. She screamed, staring up at me. ‘Help me! Oh God, help me!’ But I did nothing except walk away. I couldn’t be associated with it.” He pauses. “I didn’t even call the police from my cell phone.”

Christopher looks down, runs his fingers along the smooth edges of the maple podium.

“For weeks I couldn’t sleep. I was overcome with guilt. I kept hearing the woman’s voice in my dreams. ‘Help me! Oh God, help me!’

“I finally realized that I was not God at all. In fact, I was nothing but a coward, living my life with cotton-candy goals. Never once did my past achievements give me true satisfaction. They only spurred me to have more, to be greater, to chase after the next hollow accomplishment. And then what? More of the same. I was a fraud, hiding behind my crutch of success, too stupid and too selfish to risk my reputation helping someone other than myself.” He takes a breath. “Everything...everything I had done with my life to that point became worthless to me.” He shakes his head, remembering.

“A few months later, in talking with a long-time client and friend, I confessed what I was feeling. He suggested I try something new -- volunteering my time for a worthy cause. I scoffed at the idea. I gave away enough money to charity. I’d done my part. But his words echoed in my ears. So one day, under the guise of a rich benefactor, I toured a homeless shelter.

“When I walked in the door, the director said hello and handed me a soup ladle.” Christopher grins. “Now, there’s nothing more humbling to a haughty businessman than carrying a soup ladle. ‘We have a volunteer out sick today,’ the director told me. ‘Here’s your chance to get hands-on experience.’ He nearly shoved me to the food line, and I began to ladle soup like an over-achiever, trying to keep up with the endless stream of reaching hands. The people

regarded me, standing there in my soup-splashed Armani suit, with curious disdain. And when they ate their food, they did so quietly, heads bowed over bowls.

“After lunch, the director thanked me. ‘We can have all kinds of food on our shelves, but it’s wasted if no one is here to serve it. We can’t do this without people like you—God will bless you for it.’

“Yeah, right, I thought. God will bless me? I doubted it. ‘How do you know that?’ I asked him.

“‘Well, Christopher . . . how do you feel right now?’ he answered.

“I could only stare at him. Then he shared his story of God’s grace in his life and in the lives of others. His voice rang true and sincere, and the man seemed so content. I walked away with an itch I couldn’t scratch.

“It took years, but slowly, God wrecked me. I began to volunteer weekly, then daily. I quit my job. I gave away a lot of money, keeping just enough to live on. My nieces and nephews are furious.” He smiles.

“I set up funds and programs for the homeless, but it still wasn’t enough. How could I look these people in the eyes, how could I encourage them to help themselves, when I had never experienced what they experienced? We all knew that after a long day in the trenches, I got to go home at night, while they slept in doorways. So God became my Atticus and I was Scout, and we sat on the porch swing together. ‘Go on.’ God nudged me. ‘Try these shoes.’”

Christopher takes a sip of water, catching a drip on his lip with his thumb.

“So I sold my house and made arrangements with a local pastor to lease his church at night as a shelter. And here I am,” he says simply. “Driven and ruined. And, finally, content.”

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Gloria and the girls hurry through their showers so they can make room for the next women. There is no time, nor free dryer, to dry their hair. They take their new feminine products

and carefully put them in Gloria's pack. Martha and Penny wrap scarves around their wet hair, knowing that they will have a layer of ice on their heads by the time they are allowed in the church tonight, where Gloria will spend hours braiding the still-wet locks.

From the Y, they head to the soup kitchen to wait some more. They are near the front today, the doorway itself giving them shelter from the wind. The people in line whisper about the most recent tragedy—Sycamore Johnny froze to death on the street last night.

“What? WHAT??” Gloria asks them. Her stomach churns when she hears the answer, and she moans. Her daughters glare at her. She had turned Johnny away just last week—they are at maximum capacity allowed by the church. She leans against the peeling white paint of the soup kitchen's doorway and slides to the ground, paint chips sticking into the back of her coat like thorns.

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Christopher's captive audience silently urges him on. He describes the old church shelter where he lives, and the people he has come to love. He tells of Gloria and her daughters, and the struggles they face. He tells of Harald Montraine, a 70-year-old war veteran, who will die homeless. He tells of street people who can't see past their next bottle of whiskey, who lie in their own excrement in doorways as their urine-stained pants freeze to icy steps.

His voice becomes urgent as he tells of frozen feet, and of walking in other peoples shoes, like Atticus. He shares stories of people with broken souls and shoes with broken soles. He describes his friends whose grey toes are caked with icy mud, children who squeeze their feet into shoes that are too small.

He cries out his frustration at the hopelessness in finding a job. “How can you get a job when you have no home address or phone number at which to be contacted, no references who will vouch for you, no decent clothes to wear to an interview, and no vehicle to get you there?” He talks about the walking – three miles to get a shower, three miles back to the church—all in

horrible, smelly, soaking wet shoes. He speaks of sacrifice. “When my friend Gloria gets shoes, she saves them for her daughters. She uses an old balloon string—a string she found in a park trash can—to hold her own shoe together...” He chokes on his words.

The congregation stares as Christopher stands silent before them. He shoves one hand in his pocket and shuffles his naked feet on the harsh, all-purpose carpeting. This room is warm, and he knows Gloria is out on the streets.

Just as he’s about to speak again, calling the audience to do something in their own city, for their own people...just as he’s about to beg them to toss out their empty dreams and seek to be ruined by a God who is waiting...a boy from the crowd stands up and comes forward. He is a teenager with stringy blue hair, dressed all in black, a dog collar around his neck. He takes off his spray-painted high-tops, sets them on the steps near Christopher, then turns and shuffles back to his seat.

No one moves.

It is mere seconds before another person comes, then another and another. Soon the aisles are filled with people removing their shoes and placing them on the steps. Birkenstocks next to Docksidiers, athletic shoes next to cowboy boots, pumps next to snow boots. Christopher stares incredulously at the growing pile.

When the suits and dresses come, the murmur of the crowd goes quiet. All eyes are on a well-known businessman. His black leather shoes look expensive and new. He walks to the front, places them on the steps with the others. Turns and walks back, a strange look on his face, his feet padding down the aisle like a child.

When the service is over, three hundred people become one as they walk to their cars, sock-footed, through the snow in silence.

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At the stroke of nine, Gloria fishes the church key from her pack and lets her girls inside. She stays outside at the top of the steps to check the people as they approach. She smells their breath, checks their eyes for blood and their arms for tracks. She searches them for contraband. No alcohol, no drugs or paraphernalia, no weapons. With regret, she turns away Sonia, whose breath reeks of cheap rum. Sonia begs and cries, but Gloria stands firm.

“I will look after Luis, if you want,” Gloria says to her, evenly. Sonia glares at her through glazed eyes. She glances at her three-year-old son, who is shivering and has green snot running from his nose. Then she shoves the boy toward Gloria and turns away.

“Screw you, Gloria!” Sonia yells as she stumbles down the street. “I ain’t no fugging drunk and you know it!”

Gloria watches her go, holding Luis’ hand tightly.

“Bye, Mama,” he says, softly.

Gloria’s throat aches with tears she won’t let surface. She gathers the boy in her arms and takes him inside.

“S’Chister-fer home yet?” Luis asks.

“Soon, baby,” she murmurs. “Soon.”

He lays his head on her shoulder, wiping his nose on her scarf.

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When all the parishioners are gone, Christopher sorts through shoes. He knows the shoe size of each of his friends back home. He takes only what he needs and leaves the rest. No doubt the local shelters need them too.

He loads the Tempo, wipes the snow from the windshield, and drives to the interstate, heading east. Twelve hours until he’s homeless again.

