

Dark Echoes

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(Prompt #4 wedding shoes)

She saw herself in the mirror, a reflection of the girl she once was. Cream satin shoes waited at her feet.

Small. New. Perfect. Waiting to be worn.

She turned but there were no shoes in the room. Only in the mirror. She sighed, and carried on with her day. At eighty seven, widowed, she still lived alone, with help from friends and neighbours, and of course, the lady who came once a week to clean.

Her son had been a casualty of the war in Europe, where they sent back more medals than bodies. He had left behind a suit with sleeves too long, waiting for her to sew. There had been time. There had always seemed to be time.

Her daughter, a victim of scarlet fever. She had been ill through one winter and was gone before the thaw came. The house had held the sadness long after.

Time had taken what it wanted. It had not asked.

That night her dreams carried her through the mirror to a bedroom she had not seen in seventy years. Her hand caressed the smooth worn wood of the old dresser, the narrow bed with the handmade quilt and the lace curtains, lightly wafting in the breeze from the open window that looked out over the flower beds. The calming scent of lavender drifting in through the window. And there were the shoes. Beside the bed. Waiting. She did not touch them. Even in the dream she knew better.

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Each morning she glanced in the mirror. An old lady looked back. Until one morning she didn't.

A trick of the light, no doubt. The shoes neatly beside the bed. Only in the mirror.

The mirror seemed to be drawing her to it. She began giving the mirror fleeting glances as she passed by. The shoes were still there, as if inviting her. By the time she reached the kitchen she wasn't sure if she had actually seen them, or had expected to. In the kitchen there was a faint scent of lavender.

She told herself it was nothing, Memory. Age. The mind circling back.

The next time she stole a quick glance in the mirror, she saw the shoes were still there, but one was slightly turned, as if disturbed. She looked away. She changed her routines. Uneasy, she covered the mirror with an old sheet. Her serenity lasted only three days. The next morning when she woke, she saw the neatly folded sheet draped over a chair. She had no recollection of removing it. Glancing in the mirror, her reflection moved before she did. She hadn't seen it. She felt it. The mirror was remembering her.

Those close to her were beginning to think her memory was failing. She asked her cleaning lady to remove the shoes from the bed. She knew she saw them there. Not in the mirror. Her cleaning lady gave a puzzled look, not knowing what to say. She'd caught the old lady talking to the mirror when she arrived and it concerned her.

The dreams returned. Not always the same, but always that room. Details came back to her, small things she had forgotten she knew. A crack in the ceiling. Curtains that never quite closed. The smell of dust trapped in the sunlight. It was not memory, it was rehearsal.

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The next night, in her dreams, she was aware she had stepped through the mirror.

She looked closer. Something was different. This time she knew where to look and she knew, before she looked, she would not be alone.

She saw the girl. Young, dark haired, nervously looking at her. Herself, but younger.

The girl touched the shoes, as if looking for an answer.

Picking up a shoe, the girl asked “Are these mine?”

“Yes.” The old lady answered.

“Were we in love? she asked.

A pause. “Yes,” came the reply.

“Then why do I hesitate?” the girl asked.

“Because you should.” The words never reached her lips.

“Just nerves.” she heard herself speak.

Not her voice. Not her choice.

“Will it be a good life?” the girl asked, not looking up.

She tried to shake her head.

She took a breath and hesitated and then replied, “Yes.”

Then came the question “Will we have children?”

The old lady closed her eyes.

“Yes.” came the reply.

The girl smiled. It was unbearable.

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The girl slipped on the shoe. The shoe was new and bright and held a lifetime of promises. As she bent down towards the second shoe, she stopped.

She looked up and asked, "What if I don't wear the second one?"

Suddenly, the old lady felt the room closing in as she realised that this moment, this choice, was the life she had lived.

Words formed in her mind, in her throat.

"Don't." Her throat closed, her jaw tightened. The sound held inside.

"You will." the old lady replied.

It was not an answer. It was a need.

"Do you ever try to stop me?" the girl asked

"Yes"

"But you can't." Not a question.

"No"

Morning came softly. Neighbours found her in bed, peaceful. Gone.

The mirror reflected something strange.

A young girl in a farmhouse bedroom, one cream satin shoe on her foot, the other waiting beside it.

She had been here before.

Somewhere, deep down, the girl felt it. Not fear, not doubt, but recognition.

The girl's hand picked up the second shoe. She paused. Long enough to be a choice. Long enough not to be.

The shoe slid on.

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There had never been a choice.