

Boots

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It was raining. The cars on the high street made a sound like a whip struck on a piece of leather.

‘Right!’ his mother said, her voice tight.

She was not in her element here, out shopping on a busy Saturday. The traffic was utterly bloody, she said. The business of parking hellish, being jostled on the pavement a ghastly ordeal and as for people not wearing gloves, well, that was the final insult. Polite society was doomed. He could feel the tension in her, crackling round her small determined shape, her pointed matronly bosom (could he even bring himself to name that part of her anatomy?) jutting out into the oncoming hordes like an aggressive piece of armour. She was always ready for a fight: with him, his father, his grandfather, shop assistants, parking attendants. And now they were going to fight about shoes. He wanted Chelsea boots, the kind The Beatles had been wearing for a few years. The fashion had even reached his school, but for his mother, this was anathema. Boots, she had said with a wrinkled brow and nose. Boots?

‘Men – gentlemen – wear shoes, with laces.’ She snapped out this pronouncement as she pulled open the door to Ellistons, the department store where he had been fitted for school uniform for the last twelve years. Only two more to go now, but these two years were filled with the possibility of meeting girls at the dances the school laid on. ‘Joining forces’ was the phrase his housemaster used to describe the Saturday evening rituals where boys lined up against one wall and girls against another. ‘The opposition’ the upper years

always called them, as though they were there to play rugger, not do the twist. They came from neighbouring establishments, ones like his, with rows of iron beds like some Dickensian nightmare, but with girls in them, not boys.

When he'd first seen the iron beds, fourteen of them it must have been, all in the same room, a small bedside cupboard separating each one, he'd wanted to scream, or cry or be sick. But he'd done none of these things, just felt a punch in his gut, possibly his solar plexus – wherever that was – and this feeling had lingered all that first term: a dull ache of horror at being left in such a grey, cold, regimented place.

It had become less regimented, of course. He'd stopped noticing the iron bed frames after a bit, the anonymity of those uniform spaces became familiar and individual: Johnson in the space next to him that first year, announcing he was awake every morning with a trumpeting fart; Trent-Smith on his other side, who had what seemed like a never ending supply of ginger nuts from his tuck box. And the atmosphere of the room, so still and empty when he'd first experienced it, filled up with filthy jokes – getting filthier as the years went on – with banter, mild bullying, a hoard of swear words and nicknames that became a separate language, a dialect that could never be used, understood even, with adults, at home, in the classroom.

But now that he was going into the sixth form, the dormitory days were over. He had been made a junior prefect and with that honour came the privilege of a study bedroom, shared with only one other. Along with this privacy, and the relief of being able to choose subjects he actually quite liked, came the opportunity to be more individual when it came to dress. From the beginning of his time there, he'd been watching the boys in the top two years. The interesting ones, the ones who looked as though they knew there was a life to be lived outside the prison walls of a boarding school, grew their hair longer, had sideburns that reached to their jaws if they were lucky enough for their hormones to have kicked in, had trousers that were narrow, and boots, not shoes.

Boots.

That was the deal. You needed boots. Boots that were made for walking, dancing, getting the hell out of there.

But his mother was in charge, she reminded him with every impatient gesture, raise of her eyebrow, tut of her tongue against her teeth. His father did not get involved with clothing dilemmas. He paid the bills, went through the cheque book stubs, serviced the car, mowed the lawn and stayed firmly at work, for as long as possible. Safer that way. No need then to get tangled up in domestic squabbling. He let his wife reign supreme. And of course he wore shoes. Always. The only boots he possessed were wellingtons and the leather climbing ones he kept in the boot of his car, along with a tin of dubbin and a soft cloth.

Now they had reached the men's shoe department, and a display at the front featured exactly the pair of boots he'd set his heart on. She might, just might, be won over. If he could have buttered her up, he would. 'Turning on the charm', Johnson called it. But he just didn't know what to say.

'Your hair looks nice today, Mum.' Would that work?

But her hair was arranged in its usual helmet of curls, brushed away from her forehead so that the frown lines and grey hairs creeping along her temples were clearly on show and did not look nice. He couldn't pat her on the shoulder, hold her hand as he'd done before he went to prep school. When was the last time they'd touched each other? He had no idea. Certainly not this holidays.

'May I be of service, madam?' The shop assistant was creepy rather than charming, but his mother responded with a smile of relief as though someone had offered to lift a heavy bag off her arm.

'My son.' She gestured at him to sit down. 'He needs measuring. He seems to have been growing.' She paused and gave a laugh. 'Again!'

He could feel his skin turn hot and he wanted to reach out and grab the back of her head and slam her forehead against the poster on the wall that showed a James Bond type smoothie in some shiny black shoes and a dark suit. The kind of man his mother probably wanted him to turn into.

His long thin foot, exposed in its grey sock, measured a twelve, the shop assistant intoned. A whole size bigger than last year.

'Twelve!' His mother laughed again. 'Heavens! Have you anything that will fit? It's for school. He needs to look smart.'

The assistant gave him a brief glance. There was something about his mouth that seemed familiar. The way one incisor overlapped his central tooth almost at right angles.

‘I’ll bring a selection, madam.’

‘Boots?’ He mouthed over his shoulder so that his mother wouldn’t see.

‘If you’d like to come with me, sir.’

His mother looked up from the glove she was manoeuvring off her fingers in a series of sharp tugs.

‘Make sure you bring something suitable.’

‘Of course, madam.’

The assistant showed his incisor again and then he remembered where he’d seen it. At the pub, the one time he’d made it this summer without his parents realising. They’d been out at some do and Nick, his friend from prep school, had invited him to chance it even though they were still two years away from drinking legally. Two pubs chucked them out before they got lucky. Nick had got hold of some fags and this was their bargaining tool. They’d approached a group on their way in and offered them a packet of Number 6 in exchange for getting them a pint. Incisor had been the friendliest.

‘Yeah, all right, mate,’ he’d said. ‘My brother used to do that for me when I was your age. But you’d better go through into the garden and make sure the barman doesn’t see you.’

And now here they were again. He didn’t have any fags to offer but he did have some money on him.

‘Have a pint on me, mate,’ he said, digging half a crown out of his pocket.

Incisor grinned.

‘Thank you kindly, young sir.’

At the end of an hour, the only pair that the assistant deemed to be a proper fit were a pair of narrow, high ankle boots. They weren’t as pointed as he’d hoped and the leather was too shiny, but he’d soon knock the crap out of them.

His mother, her mouth a thin line, was writing a cheque at the counter. The assistant was smiling but his mother would not meet anyone’s eye.

‘Boots,’ she said, as they walked down the street. ‘If your

housemaster complains, you'll just have to say they were the only things we could find to fit your enormous feet.'

He grinned down at her shoulders as he walked one step behind her, his mind already so many steps ahead.