

"IT AIN'T THE SHOES..."

BY M.VIDAKOVICH

"So, what'cha got in a size seven?" the girl says. She's innocent looking, as opposed to her friend who's probably around twenty, but who looks more like she's near forty.

"Uh, this is a *men's* shoe store," I reply. "Why don't you go down the mall further? There's at least four or five women's stores down that way." I have no idea what they're looking for. I don't think it's shoes. The girl doing the talking, while her friend is wiping her nose on her sleeve, looks like Snow White.

"So when you gonna come to Pontiac with us?" she says with a grin. She has long black hair, parted on the left side, and round, angelic cheekbones. At first, she would sit outside the tiny store, without her friend. She'd walk past the store slowly, dressed in a floral print dress that exposed a few inches of pearlescent skin below her neck. This outfit was always accompanied by knee high, fake leather boots. The boots didn't look very warm. Well, it was January in the Midwest, after all. She'd sit near the faux tropical fountain, with the heavily chlorinated water spewing from the cheap, composite dolphins poking up behind

her. This always provided a cruel and tacky foil to the fierce frozen landscape that hung in monochrome in the large glass windows next to me. She would be there for ridiculously long stretches of time. All day, on many occasions. Then, she started to come in. She would strike up conversation by slowly circling the small shoe store. Her boots were always caked with road salt and dirt. When she'd finally step closer to speak, I could get the faint smell of a very lightly scented soap. That, and... mothballs, maybe?

This girl was sort of disarming. Not like any of the kids that I knew; the boys and girls who's orbit I shared as we all began our bumpy ride into adulthood. I was sure of this without even knowing her. Though we were both still in our late teens, this girl was childlike and almost other-worldly. She had no filter, no defenses. What teenager doesn't have filters and defenses? There was something naive about her.

Raw, I guess you'd say.

And girls like that just didn't go after guys like me anyway. Suburban dreamers of escape and acquisition. They didn't show up in my world. But I doubt that escape ever crossed her mind. She seemed truly happy where she was, as she was.

Then, there's her friend. While this chicks' boots were covered in street grime, the friend seemed completely caked in road salt from head to toe. It was on almost all of her clothes, and in the knit hat she wore. It even seemed to be in her hair. They were both either transplanted or second generation Southerners. From Ohio, or Kentucky. They're all over this part of the state, and truth be told, a lot of them aren't too friendly. But these two were real friendly. "Maybe they're junkies" I thought, in a cynical mood one day after they had both left the store. That one weird chick did wipe her nose an awful lot. Then, this whole carefree and innocent aura that they carried around raised a little suspicion. The ugly one, the nose wiper, was Karlyne. ("Daddy's name's Karl, momma's name's Lynne, get it?") And I'm sorry, but ugly's the only way to put it. She had that witchy look that a lot of junkies get. The bad teeth and everything.

"An' she's Gerri!" Karlyne adds enthusiastically, pointing at her friend as Gerri held one of the display loafers; "The Disciple", I believe it was called. It was tasseled, and in a burnished brown and you could see the hot, dirty overhead spotlights in its' surface. I just couldn't figure these two out. But it seemed like Gerri

might have a crush on me. I mean, "*What else could it be?*", I thought. She's here almost every day.

"Ohhh...I like that one" Gerri says.

She's cradling a man's brown wing tip oxford in her hands as she smiles at me. Karlynnne sits across the store, straddling one of the fitting stools that has the little ramp that customers can put their foot on. She's playing with the metal shoe sizer, sliding the size guide up and down.

"Hey..what size'r you?" she yells to me.

"Put it down..... Phyllis" I said.

"Hey, why're yew callin' me Phyllis?" she asks with a chuckle.

"Uh-oh" I'm thinking.

She puts down the shoe sizer and quickly walks over. She's right up on me, looking into my face. The "Phyllis" comment seemed to get more of a reaction than I had figured. But just about anything I'd say to these girls got them all worked up. And Karlynnne did look like a, let's say more "country" version of the comedienne Phyllis Diller. I couldn't help it. It just came out. And as I'm standing there, I also can't help it as I break into a slow and wide grin while I take in this strange little lady. I back up and

say,

"I don't know, you just... seem like a Phyllis." She laughed at that as she ran up to her friend.

"D'jew hear that? He gave me a new name."

Then Gerri looks at me as she holds another display shoe. This one, I believe was called the "Prophet." The shoe had to have two hundred coats of furniture polish on it. The manager was adamant about this. He said it was an industry trick to make them look good under the display lights. Probably why the brown ones looked like little oaken jewel boxed with laces. Anyway, Gerri's looking up at me the same way a five year old looks at a very doting and loving father, and my heart starts to beat fast. She's cradling the shoe as she sways softly back and forth. She should look ridiculous. But if I thought she was beautiful before, now I feel like I'm buried in cement. I can't move.

"You two....really, I'm not tryin' to be a dick. I mean, you're a hoot and everything but, seriously, women's shoes are all over this Mall." I say this as I'm pointing in all directions like a brain addled traffic cop, trying to get them out of the store. I'm also trying to get my feet out of the trap that Gerri now has me stuck in. She then tips her head a little and says,

"It ain't the shoes we're hankerin' for."

I look over at Karlynn and she's grinning from ear to ear as she wipes her nose on her sleeve.

And on it goes. Gerri is there almost every day. For some reason, Karylynn now comes only about once a week. This is usually toward the weekend. And almost every single time, Gerri will say, "So when you comin' with us to Pontiac?" I always deflect the question with a wise ass response. Because they are still,.... I don't know.... They always seem to set me back on my heels. But I think I'm developing a real crush on Gerri. So when she makes her next visit, wearing the same floral print dress and black knee high boots, I ask her if we can go out, just her and I. She looks up at me in the same dizzying way she had earlier while holding that shoe in her hands.

"HMMMMMM..." she cooed, just thinking. Or maybe she wasn't thinking at all.

"Well hell," she finally exclaims as she slaps me playfully on the arm. "When you just gonna come with us to Pontiac? That's goin' out ain't it?" Then, "Bye" she says as she walks out. Maybe they're shoplifters. I do a double take around the small store, then look out into the Mall and she's already gone.

I didn't see either of them for about a week and a half, a long time, for them. And you know what? I immediately missed them. Yeah, even Karlynnne; and in a lot of ways, *especially* Karlynnne. One night, I'm driving home at around 5pm as it's starting to get dark. It's sleeting out and hellishly miserable. It's one of those days that usually falls on the second or third week of January when, even in mid afternoon, it never really gets light out. Before I have to make a right turn, I see the backsides of two figures walking down the edge of the road. I flinch as I see that there is slush and salt coating both of them. It's mainly concentrated on their left sides. It looks to have been sprayed from the passing cars and trucks, as if the two pedestrians were just fire hydrants. But I try not to think much of it as I make the turn. And then, as I look in my side view mirror, I see that it's Gerri, and Karlynnne. They're both trudging through the filthy snow as Karlynnne clutches Gerri who almost seems as though she's holding her up. They're waiting to cross the street toward the Pontiac side of the highway.

Are they walking home? If they are, it means they probably walk to the shopping center. Maybe this is what the "Come to Pontiac" stuff is all about. They need a ride, but

are maybe too proud or ashamed to ask. I really should turn around. But it's 5pm and it's bumper to bumper. I would also have to drive a few blocks before I'd get to a proper turn around spot. Then, they'd be on the other side of the street. Then, there's the traffic again. I keep comforting myself with these rationalizations, but I don't know how to feel right now because Gerri is on my mind an awful lot these days. So is Karlyne, because I don't see her very often anymore. Reality is now kicking at me. There's more distance between these girls and myself than a long walk from Pontiac. But then... it's not like my life is all that great; having been recently dumped by an arrogant and slutty girlfriend; an ultimately dim soul from a well to do family who talked to me like a probation officer and treated me like a sock puppet. I'm in between my freshman and sophomore year at college, and I'm working this minimum wage job. Usually, it's just me, standing around a deserted indoor tundra while the weak light of the Great North fades as quickly as it arrives.

So, on a Friday, more than two weeks after I'd seen them walking in the ice and cold, Gerri came in by herself. She had on the same floral print dress, same salty black boots. She was bubbly as usual, but something felt

different. Everything seemed a little forced. She was, on this day, like many other kids I knew; familiar, yet cloaked, in some way. Finally, after a bit of small talk, I said,

"So, where's your buddy?" referring to Karlynnne.

"Oh,.....she's gone." she said in a lilting voice as she looked around the store, running her index finger over a few of the displays. Finally, after a long silence she said,

"Well,... you got no choice, you know?"

"What?" I asked.

"You gotta take me to Pontiac, OK?", she replied in sort of loud bark. I didn't want to bring up that I had seen her and Karlynnne by the side of the road that one afternoon. Not now anyway. Because it looked like she might, at last, be asking for a ride. I sighed and said,

"Gerri, why....why don't you just go out with me?"

"I cain't" she said walking toward the front as she pulled her coat snug around her neck.

"Come on," she said again in that same bark. "Close 'er up, it's closin' time now, an' you gotta take me to Pontiac."

I knew right then and there that if I wasn't careful, I was going to fall head over heels in love with her, and I

don't know if that's an option at this point. But, I lose myself in this moment anyway. We walked to my car as the fifteen degree winds blew razor blades into my face and swept Gerri's hair back. She was holding my arm and smiling at me. We get in my car and she points to Huron Street East. As I'm driving through the darkened streets, I'm suddenly struck by a thunderbolt;

"What am I doing? Am I being set up?"

I suddenly feel every bit of my nineteen years. I'm wrapped up in all of the things that come with them, and grasping for the knowledge that doesn't. I should have stuck with my first impression; especially Karlynnne. And why isn't *she* here? That's it. They're *both* setting me up.

For what? I have no idea. But even a teenager knows you don't go into the area she's now leading me. A lot of different scenarios were playing in my head. None of them were good, but it's too late now. Suddenly, my stomach begins to rise up into my throat a little. I'll just have to play it by ear. I've got no choice.

We don't speak as Gerri points and tells me to turn left down Saginaw. I breathe a little easier now because it's a well lit street that's leading us back into the

downtown area. We turn down a small side street. She then points to a building that has steam coming out of the rusty vents that are situated on top of its rickety roof. There are some people huddled in front drinking something warm, like coffee or hot chocolate. Some are talking, and all are moving from left foot to right, trying to stay warm or to get warm.

"That buildin' there" she says softly. I slow down and as I get to the front, I can see the sign above the door. I can also make out the small, wooden statue of The Virgin Mary leaning a bit to the left on the snow covered grassy area. I stop the car. My blood feels so thick. It has me moving, talking and even thinking in slow motion. Gerri's looking right at me now. After an anxious moment or two, I say,

"Gerri....where's Karlyne?" A long silence, then,

"She's gone." she says again, only this time, much softer than she had said it back at the store. She puts her hand on the door latch.

"Thanks for the ride" she says with a smile. I touch her on the arm.

"Gerri....please...I want to..."

What? I want to what? Be with you? Tell you that I love

you?

Yes, that's it. Tell her that you love her, now.

"I cain't" she says in a grainy rasp. Her eyes are focused on the brightly lit doorway.

"I cain't", she repeats. Gerri then clears her throat as she looks out the windshield at the giant snowflakes slowly building on the glass. She smiles and kisses two of her fingers and lets them softly linger on my lips. She then walks out of the car, through the heavily salted entrance, and into St. Perpetua's Mission For Women.