



BLACK STILETTOS

Lynette Lloyd Moss



LLOYD MOSS *publishing*

Telephone 0421 998 749

lynnejlloyd@outlook.com

www.lloydmosspublishing.com

INTRODUCTION

Hi, I'm so glad you have downloaded this complimentary story from my 2022 short story collection, "The Belly of the Whale."

With the exception of two of the stories, the protagonists in this collection are women and girls who stay the course and navigate the headwinds and hardships in their lives. They are plunged into situations and events such as job loss, mental breakdown, elder abuse, marital infidelity and loneliness, amongst others.

Please feel free to share the "Black Stilettos" short story with your family members, friends and work colleagues; in fact, anyone you think will enjoy this story of two women who meet by chance (or is it chance?) in a department store one fine morning.

If you enjoyed reading "Black Stilettos," you will enjoy the other nine stories in "The Belly of the Whale." The book is available in paperback or in Kindle e-book. For further information and/or to purchase a copy: <https://www.loydmosspublishing.com/projects>

Did "Black Stilettos" end the way you thought it would? Drop me a line with your thoughts on this story and any other topics in relation to writing, editing and publishing. Contact details below.

Doing the write thing (and loving it!)

Lynne

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From "The Belly of the Whale and Other Short Stories"

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BLACK STILETTOS

It felt strange to be wearing high heels again. These days Heather spent most of her time in sneakers or thongs. She had gone from wearing high heels on the catwalk of life to throwing on any old thing to pop into the local shop or servo for milk or chocolate (the latter when she absolutely had to have a Cherry Ripe!) Holding on to the chair arms, she stood up in the strappy black stilettos. She had almost forgotten how high heels made you feel. It was the power of the feminine; you became a more confident version of yourself. But could she remember how to walk in them?

She tried to visualise how it was when she wore high heels to work every day. Heather took a small step forward and stopped to get her balance, then another, and another. Great, it was coming back to her! She posed in front of the floor-level mirror, secretly pleased at how the shoes accentuated her slim ankles and the curve of her lower leg. Growing bolder, she moved her feet and admired the black stilettos from various angles.

She was the leading lady in the musical, dancing on the empty streets of a deserted city. Heather felt light-hearted and carefree the way she used to when she was young and glamming up for a special date. Underneath, she was still that same adventurous young woman who wanted to throw herself into the deep end of life and experience it all. Today was a rare occurrence for her: she was child free. Ben had taken their three kids to the pool to be followed by a visit to McDonalds. She was shopping for an outfit to wear to a girlfriend's wedding next month. Being alone, she was able to take her time and browse in a leisurely way and, most wonderful of all, to focus on herself. Like the Toyota ad, 'Oh, what a feeling!'

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Heather returned to the chair and removed the black stilettos. She decided they were the ones to beat. As she was putting the shoes back in their box, someone sat down next to her in a whoosh of air laden with the sweet scent of L'Air Du Temps. A sleeve brushed against her bare arm.

Heather exclaimed, "Oh!" How bizarre, the person was practically on top of her! If every chair had been taken, she would have understood. But there were rows of spare chairs in the Ladies Shoes Department and not many customers at this time of day. Heather glanced to her right. The newcomer was a well-groomed older woman with blonde hair who smiled pleasantly at her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," she apologised.

Realising she must have revealed her displeasure on her face, Heather softened her expression and replied, "That's okay." She took in the woman's appearance. Her blonde hair was cut in a fashionable short bob and her make-up was understated and expertly applied. She was wearing a white linen overshirt, a denim blue top and blue faded and deliberately torn jeans. The hint of a smile played around the older woman's mouth as if she wished to project a cooperative, pleasant personality to the world. From that one quick glance, Heather could tell she was a nice person, even if she had invaded her personal space.

At that moment, a tiny bird-like woman in black bustled around the corner. Her name tag read 'Wilma Scott, Certified Expert Fitter, Department Manager.' She was carrying a stack of four shoeboxes which she set down on the floor in front of Heather. Wilma stared at the two women sitting side by side, looking from one to the other and announced: "You must be mother and daughter!"

"No," Heather replied, shocked. "We don't even know each other." "The things people say!" she thought.

The other customer was shaking her head, still smiling enigmatically.

“Oh, I apologise. You are so alike, it’s amazing,” Wilma said, her eyes were wide behind her spectacles.

“No harm done,” Heather murmured.

The other customer was dangling a tan-coloured sandal from the index finger of her right hand. The manager asked, “Is someone looking after you?”

“No, not as yet” she replied.

The manager turned to Heather, “We’re rather short staffed this morning. Would you mind if I assisted you both at the same time?”

“Not at all,” Heather replied, as she opened one of the shoeboxes.

“What size are you?” the manager asked the new customer.

“Eight and a half.”

“That’s my size too!” Heather said, as she slipped into another pair of high heels.

“This has been a popular sandal. I hope we have your size left,” the manager said to the older woman. Walking briskly, she headed back to her stockroom.

“It’s not easy to make a choice, is it?”

It took a moment or two before Heather realised the older woman was speaking to her.

“For me, it can be impossible” Heather answered. “I usually can’t make up my mind and end up buying at least two pairs. But what woman doesn’t love shoes and handbags!”

The women laughed, their laughter blending and harmonising and ending in a throaty gurgle.

The older woman introduced herself, “Hello, I’m Margo.”

Heather nodded and responded, “Nice to meet you, Margo; I’m Heather.” She hadn’t looked closely at Margo’s face until now. Heather had the distinct impression she had seen Margo before. Where had they met? Was it at one of the kids’ schools perhaps, or at the medical centre, or the hairdresser? She was sure she knew Margo from somewhere.

“I feel as if we have met before,” Heather said, “Do you live around here?”

“It’s not likely. I’m from Sydney and am here on the Sunshine Coast for a few days’ holiday.”

“Sounds lovely. Do you have family living here?”

“No, unfortunately I don’t. I’m an only child and my parents died several years ago,” Margo explained.

“I am sorry,” Heather responded warmly. Margo was volunteering a lot of information about herself which wasn’t that unusual as many women bond quickly by sharing their experiences.

Margo seemed eager to talk, and said “Can I tell you something?”

“Yes, of course,” Heather replied.

“It’s my birthday this week. I am turning fifty.” She poked fun at herself, adding “I’ve been told it’s all downhill from here.”

Heather protested, “It doesn’t have to be downhill at all. At fifty, you are still young! There is so much for older people – for people of all ages - to learn, experience and achieve.”

“It’s good to hear you say that” Margo said, smiling broadly.

“It’s really a matter of having a positive mindset -” Heather heard herself spouting platitudes which she realised could be interpreted by Margo as superficial and patronising. She stopped talking. Some things are easy to say but hard to do.

But Margo was listening intently and nodding. She continued, “I’m buying myself new shoes as a birthday present.”

“Oh, good for you!” Heather was enthusiastic, “I always give myself a present for my birthday. If I don’t spoil myself, I don’t know who will! What are you doing on the day, Margo?”

“Not much really,” Margo replied, “I am on my own. Usually my birthday is just another day. But turning fifty, I decided to go away to a different place so I can look back and remember it.” Margo spoke in a calm, unbothered way. It was as if she had resigned herself to being alone on her birthday. If she was alone on her birthday, Heather realised, Margo would be alone on the other days of the year. But did being alone mean that she was lonely?

“There’s no one? I can’t believe it!” Heather exclaimed, genuinely shocked. She found herself imagining what it would be like to be Margo waking up on her special day with no one to wish her ‘Happy Birthday,’ no one to kiss her and wrap their arms around her. Heather reminded herself not to mention her husband, kids, relatives and many friends. This woman was suffering enough - she did not want to make it any worse. It was terribly sad. Being an unreformed romantic, Heather believed there was someone for everyone in the world. How was it possible that a lovely woman like Margo was alone? She had no family left but what about friends, relationships? Had she broken up with someone recently? Had she been badly hurt? What was her story?

“Where do you work?” Heather enquired.

“In the State Government. I am a systems analyst in the Department of Transport.”

“Do you have far to travel to work?” Heather had read about people in Sydney who travelled for hours on the train each day to work in the CBD.

“I live in Manly and go to work by ferry across the Harbour.”

“Lucky you. It must be the best commute in the world!” Heather said.

‘They seem to be getting on well,’ Wilma Scott observed as she returned, carrying a single shoebox to Margo. “Good news, we’re in luck with your size.” She knelt on the carpet in front of Margo and looked up.

Both women had crossed their right legs over their left and their right feet dangled in front of her face. The manager could not believe what she was seeing. Both women had overlapping pinky toes! Her eyes darted to their left feet and they were the same. From her training as a fitter, she knew this particular toe abnormality was hereditary. What an extraordinary coincidence! ‘But it is not my place to say anything,’ Wilma decided. She had better not to go there, especially as she had felt like such a fool earlier.

Heather tried on three more pairs as she compiled a mental list of the other things she wanted to do that morning. Whenever she made a comment or asked a question, Margo launched into a long, detailed monologue. Heather let her talk on, nodding from time to time. Margo was like a wanderer who had staggered out of the desert and into an oasis where there were pools of cool fresh water and shady palms. She was parched for someone to listen and acknowledge her existence in the world.

Heather decided on the black stilettos and a pair of eye-catching red sandals. She picked up the shoe boxes, slung her tote bag over her shoulder,

and rose from the chair, “Well, it’s been lovely talking to you, Margo. As you can see, two pairs!” Heather said ruefully, adding “I hope you have a very happy birthday!” As she spoke them, the words sounded hollow and meaningless. Heather tried not to see the disappointment which instantly appeared on Margo’s face when she realised Heather was leaving.

Margo murmured “Thank you, Heather. It’s been nice to chat to you.”

Having paid for her purchases, Heather turned in the direction of the escalators. She felt relieved but equally she felt guilty. Margo was a lonely lady. If she had been in Margo’s situation, she would have been totally miserable. It was obvious Margo had chosen to sit next to her and start up a conversation. She had wanted to connect with another human being. Heather thought, ‘I could have – should have - asked her to join me for a coffee.’

She held her back straight and her head high as she walked. Was Margo following her with her eyes? ‘Don’t look back!’ she said to herself, ‘Don’t look back!’ Otherwise you will be lost like Lot’s wife, punished for disobeying God and looking back at Sodom. She was turned into a pillar of salt. No more dancing for Lot’s wife.

Heather dawdled on her way, stopping to look at rack of designer sunglasses displaying a 40% off sale sign. Something was holding her back when all she really wanted was to get on with her day. She looked up and caught sight of herself in one of the store’s floor-to-ceiling mirrors. She stared into the image reflected there. The word ‘selfish’ reverberated in her head and she accused her image, ‘Face it, you’re a selfish bitch!’ Involuntarily she turned and looked back and saw Margo sitting in the same place, now alone. She looked forlorn like a little child who had been left at the child care centre for the first time. Margo saw her, raised her arm and waved.

She inclined her head and waved back. She was torn between her inherent reserve and self-centredness and an insistent inner voice saying ‘Reach out to her, be kind and give her the gift of your time. Be prepared to give a damn! All the lonely people in the world are too big a problem for anyone to solve, but today this one lonely woman has reached out to me and I can do something for her.’ But then her thoughts rushed in the opposite direction: ‘What’s wrong with Margo that she doesn’t have anyone in her life?’ ‘Am I responsible for the choices she has made?’ ‘Am I her keeper?’

A curtain of indifference came down on Heather. She hardened her heart: ‘I am not Margo’s keeper; I don’t owe her anything.’ Fixing her eyes on the white floor tiles, she resumed walking. She did not look back a second time.



TO PURCHASE

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AN INVITATION

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0421 998749

lynnejlloyd@outlook.com

www.lloydmosspublishing.com