

**James Reed**

### **What All You Don't Need**

The guy with big feet likes slip-on shoes. He's probably dead. A whole table's his size. Loafers and mules, Barley thinks people call them. Open in back like wooden shoes worn in Holland, which has never made sense. For one thing they're noisy, *klok-klok* every step, and then there's the question of how they stay on, or what's worn in winter. Ice-skating goes back maybe five hundred years. He thinks he's seen paintings. Why bother with footwear no use half the time?

A woman leans forward, holds her cigarette wide. It smells raspy and sweet even in the cool breeze. Fall's sneaking up but not yet in the leaves. She points at a pair. "Them are four bucks. I'd take four if you want."

"Just looking," he nods.

He's a runt, if she'd notice, with feet almost dainty, as hard to fit all his life as this fellow's whose shoes are laid out in neat rows. Sizes 13 and 14, but only one of the latter. A dead guess or gamble: there's no wear and tear. With his duck-footed walk all his heels were sloped low. Dents deep as golf balls cushioned his toes.

The man's sister or mother stands in the yard and gathers a hose. It's one of three stretched on the lawn. One's black, one is gray, and she's looping a green one over her arm. It's shiny and loose like it's fresh from the store.

"The gray one is longer if you got a big yard. We'll toss in the sprinkler."

A man on the driveway says, "No, this'll do," and flips through a few bills like he's dealing out solitaire.

"I left it out back. I should really go get it." She hauls in a coil and yanks at another.

She could be a wife but too nearly resembles the woman, still smoking, in charge of the shoes. They both wear flower-print dresses Barley'd expect of his grandmother, but the one in the yard has added a sweatshirt. It's bubble-gum pink with a view of Mount Rushmore. Her hair's thin and windswept and stained yellow-brown. He guesses her fingertips are about the same color, but she's working the hose and he can't really see. She's definitely tired. Her face is fatigued. He can't place her age, but his own plus or minus ten years could be right. And possibly low-ball. Neither one of these two has led a charmed life.

The man on the driveway is bored with his money. He takes out his phone. Panels of light sweep under his fingers.

Other dresses and sweatshirts sway from a coatrack you'd find in a narthex or fellowship hall. A woman with legs as straight-stiff as bedposts walks finger by finger across all the hangers. Her face is a fist, as if she is sniffing. She inspects every item for flaws or some difference in color or texture. Perhaps she wants style. Nothing he sees comes close to her size.

The sisters, if anything, have shrunk over time. That's his guess. Their legs are old sticks, and their dresses are nothing but dust and dry wind.

His own whiskers aren't hair, the older he gets. Fishing line is more like it, four pound test, monofilament. Fingernails, maybe, or toenails — they're stronger — slivered and twisted and wrapped tight as twine. Polar bear fur. Colorless, pale, dripping wet green in harsh light and pool water.

"Let me fetch you that sprinkler." She offers the hose. "I won't be a minute."

He looks up from his phone as if he's forgotten. The surprise of the hose is a weight on his arm. He raises his wrist so the bend of his elbow won't let the coils fall to the ground.

"Stay here," she says.

He stares and says, "Sure."

She starts around back but her sister calls, "Wait!" and flattens her cigarette left and right with her toe. "His statues," she says. "We should let them just go."

"I told you that. You cried and whined No!"

"But you're right. I been thinking. Every one of them's ugly."

"That's not new overnight."

"Don't be suspicious. I'm coming halfway."

She tugs at her sweatshirt and examines the clouds. They do not threaten rain. "I'll have to pack them. This might take a while." She enters the house by unlocking the door.

"We never done this. People walk through your house, they might take advantage." She flicks at her lighter but only draws sparks. "I am due for a new one." She draws his attention to charcoal gray slippers as round as pontoons. "Boiled wool," she informs him. "That means they're German. Good for winter," she says.

At the coatrack the woman holds a dress by its hanger across her own chest and then tries another, left hand to right hand like semaphore flags. Nothing fits — that's the message — but she

blames the colors. "My complexion," she says, "simply isn't done justice."

"He was so cold and freezing those last couple months." She comes up with a cigarette. "And big as he was, he'd sweat all the time." Her thumb spins the wheel, but the lighter is useless.

Barley hands over his.

"Thank you," she says.

A stream of fresh smoke, and she's looking relieved.

"You'd be surprised what all you don't need."

The man with the hose has picked out an egg timer. "That sprinkler," he says, "I'll take this instead." He shakes it as if he expects it to rattle. He nods when it's silent and lopes down the driveway.

"I'd taken a quarter if he'd thought to offer." He'd bent like an insect, climbing into his car. It's round as a gumball, with room for just him. "I bet he wants it for playing charades."

"Time's up," Barley says.

"What's surprising he thinks is the lack of men's clothes.

There are the shoes but no shirts or trousers. No belts or old jackets, no bathrobes or ties. Nothing you'd keep or donate to charity for being too good to just throw away. Not a garment in sight you'd take for a dollar or let yourself dicker on price to get a small bargain.

"You're slight," says the woman. "You might take a sweat-shirt. They're not all just girly."

The stout woman stiffens and decides she's not done. She returns to the coatrack and paws through the goods so everyone hears the quick scrape of the hangers.

Barley shrugs. "Check shirts run the gamut of what I will wear."

"Solids and plaids?"

"Risky," he says. "I have never once owned a sweater."

"Mae's always felt chilled. That's old as dirt. Ever since she was little."

Barley gives a hard shiver and grins a farewell as he turns to his car. He's half a block down, but he parks and strolls because some form of exercise might do him some good.

"Hey! You forgot." She's poised with his lighter for an under-hand toss.

"Keep it," he says. "I'm trying to quit."

She laughs, shakes her head. "You're just tenderhearted. I know that's a fib."