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## Open-toed steps

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## “Open-Toed Steps”

“Today my friend Ralph told me that cheese is just as tasty three weeks past the expiration date. He says that cheese is meant to be moldy.” It’s my Daughter Morgan’s voice echoing in the kitchen of our high-rise penthouse suite. She has quite the imagination. So much that she seems to have dreamed up a new friend she refers to as, Ralph.

My husband, Paul, says it is perfectly normal for a nine-year-old to have an imaginary friend, especially an only child. Why isn’t she interested in playing with the other girls her age? For once I would like for her to come home from school or the park across the street and tell me all about how little Miss so-and-so doesn’t understand why boys like to play with worms and weapons.

“Sweetheart,” I tell her in my Mother-knows-best voice, “let’s worry less about old Ralph, and more about you eating your grilled cheese sandwich that Harriet made just for you.

I don’t know what I would do without the assistance of our full-time maid, Harriet. I was unprepared for a colicky baby as a first-time mother. Raising Morgan did not come easy to me. Paul suggested that as long as we had the money, we could hire a full-time maid/nanny, just until I got used to the new lifestyle. I felt guilty at the time, but Paul said that Harriet would surely be honored to work in such a classy home. The moment I met her, the sunlight of our skylight illuminated her in a heaven-like aura among the shiny ceramics of our kitchen. I relied on her from then on.

I stare down into my oversized mug, steaming with hot tea. More so than the strong scent of lavender, I notice it is high time for me to schedule a spa day through my worn reflection. A few shots of Botox here and there wouldn't hurt either. I've seen the way that Paul curiously glances at the twenty-something nurses at his hospital. I can't hide the fact that I will never gain back the perky youth that those candy stripers flaunt in the face of my husband.

“Mommy, I think Ralph would really like it if I gave him some new shoes. His toes poke out the ends. People might make fun of him. He might get cold. If my new light up sneakers would fit Ralph, I would give them to him, but he doesn't wear a size four and a half.”

I can't believe Morgan wants me to buy handouts for her fake friend. I admit, it is quite sweet of her to be thinking of others, but honestly, it is time for Ralph to hit the highway. My husband says it is only a stage, and that she will grow out of it eventually. I suppose I should hold on to this childhood phase before she starts sporting a training bra, the wrong shade of makeup, or even worse— a boyfriend in tow.

“Morgan, imaginary friends do not need nice shoes. You are the only one who sees Ralph's beat up shoes and clearly you will not be making fun of him anytime soon,” I assure her, hoping to put an end to the conversation.

I can't even say the word shoes anymore without visions of midnight magenta Dior sling-back peep-toe pumps or Oscar de la Renta passionate pink stilettos click clacking one sexy step at a time through my mind.

“But Mom, Ralph is real!”

“That is enough make believe for today, young lady. Harriet? Harriet, come take Morgan to the playroom to do something productive. I need some time to myself. Be a dear and draw me a hot bath with those European bath beads Oprah raves about.”

\* \* \*

I disappear into the steamy water and close my eyes, trying to picture my nude body fifteen years younger and tighter than a locked jar of pickles. I surface back into reality by the echoed ring of the telephone. It is Paul, once again, quickly apologizing for the fact that he will not be able to make it home tonight.

“Duty calls,” he reminds me, trying to prevent me from putting up a fight. Apparently he has an “emergency surgery” to tend to. I may be blonde, but I’m not dumb enough to actually believe that his hands will be working miracles on the operating table tonight. His hands will surely be all over some nurse’s lollypops. I hope he remembers to scrub well afterward.

For months now, Paul has denied having an affair, but I’ve smelled more than just iodine on him when he comes home post-surgery. I find it hard to believe that any of his patients have rubbed off Calvin Klein’s signature scent, Euphoria, on him while under the knife. I insist that Harriet wash and rewash his undershirts that tend to leave that nasty smell lingering.

The real emergency in need of attention is our wounded marriage. Our so-called relationship is inching its way beyond repair. No stitches, staples, or medicine could put us back together again. My two-carat, princess-cut diamond is a flashy reminder that we were once head over heels in love. That symbol of love and affection, along with my

daughter (the spitting image of Paul) are the only remaining evidence that our fairy tale ever existed.

Oprah was right; the bath beads were worth the seventy dollars of momentary bliss. However, I was hoping to emerge out of the oversized Jacuzzi tub a new woman who shed her old, depressing skin. My disappointment follows me as I step onto the bath rug and tiptoe towards the perspiring mirror above our “his and hers” sinks. Although no one is watching, with each step I am further embarrassed of the delayed jiggle of my inner thighs and sagging breasts. I’m convinced there’s a fly on the wall snickering at the extra bounce in my step. I move close enough to come face-to-face with my own sadness. How is it that laugh lines define my face when I haven’t laughed in months? I reach out to wipe the tears that roll down this reflective face and the mirror reveals a sharper image of my pity party—solo once again.

I stop picking apart the imperfections of my face and bow my head, glimpsing down towards my cherry red toenails. It’s my favorite shade of OPI polish, “I’m Really Not a Waitress.” I’m checking myself out and my teary eyes stop at the sight of the horizontal scar below my belly button. Morgan was brought into this world via cesarean section. I am suddenly fixated on this non-beauty mark. It is how my baby girl and I were disconnected after nine months and three days of unity.

\* \* \*

M-O-R-G-A-N is proudly displayed in large block letters three doors down from my master suite, marking the territory of my daughter’s princess-like bedroom. I open the door to find Morgan sitting across her checkers board from a teddy bear she got from FAO Schwarz last Christmas.

“What are you up to, sweetie?” I interrupt.

“Hi, Mommy! Mr. Bear and me are playing checkers. He is feeling a little stiff today, so I am moving his pieces for him. King me!” she screeches and adds one of her furry friend’s pieces to the top of her victory.

I reach for Morgan’s long, wavy, blonde locks and run my fingers from her scalp to where the tips meet her lower back. I don’t remember the last time I fashioned her hair into a pony or pigtail. I have added that to the list of Harriet’s household duties. It fits into her daily routine between helping Morgan color coordinate her outfit and cooking up a hearty breakfast.

No sooner than the moment I picture Harriet flipping one of her famous fried eggs, she appears in the doorway. She has one of Morgan’s dolls tucked under her arm in a tight football hold, and her opposite hand rests on her hefty hip. I don’t understand how she can carry extra weight on her saddlebags when she is a non-stop robotic woman, much like, Rosie, the Jetson’s maid. By the appearance of her slightly pregnant-looking tummy, I wouldn’t doubt if she, too, hides a dishwasher in there. I stop analyzing her curves and look up, following her voice.

“Miss Morgan, you left your baby doll, Coach, on the floor in the playroom. My vacuum nearly ate her up”

“Sorry, Harriet. I can’t believe I forgot her. I never leave the house without Coach. She is my very favorite accessory in the world!” replied Morgan as she grabbed her doll and cradled her in her arms.

“Girl, you sound just like your mother,” Harriet shot back with a chuckle.

I never knew that the doll I gave Morgan on her fifth birthday had a name. How strange for her to name it after the brand of my favorite purse. She has better taste than I thought. Damn, my Coach purse even makes my basic Juicy Couture sweat suit look glamorous. I burst my own thought bubble featuring my stunning handbag, and become entranced by the motherly touch my daughter pours over her lifeless baby doll. Harriet picks up on my fixation, and whispers, “She treats that doll as if it were her own eating, sleeping, breathing child. She will make a great mother someday. She will make you proud, Miss Julia.”

I nod to Harriet and glance out the window that overlooks the buzz of taxis and the gray architecture of the city. The leaves of the few trees below have begun to change in color. They used to be a greedy green color, grabbing attention as they stood out in contrast to the neutral siding of skyscrapers. They have slowly faded into shades of pale yellow, falling to the ground and resting among the rushed steps of society. Just past the stoplight holding up traffic, I eye the park filled with moms pushing strollers and children running from one adventure to the next.

“Harriet, I’m taking Morgan to the park. You have the night off.” I surprise myself with this statement, but I know this impulse is much needed.

I watch Morgan’s eyebrows raise and a smile spread. You cannot put a price on a look like that.

“Really, Mommy? The park?” Morgan asks, jumping to her feet and into my arms.

“Really, sweetie.”

I take in her youthful scent concocted of Kool Aid and cheap fruity perfume. It smells wonderful. I am amazed at how well a mother and daughter can fit together into one beautifully interlaced braid of female.

\* \* \*

Morgan's light-up tennis shoes lead the way to the elevator, one pink flash at a time. She pushes the button, the door chimes open, and we are instantly surrounded by the soft tunes of a piano trickling out of the speakers. Morgan has surprisingly left her doll in her room, and is instead clinging to a brown paper sack with slight grease marks staining through it. She shifts the mystery bag behind her back, holding it securely with both hands.

The elevator makes a stop on the fifth floor and in walks a family of four. They look like they just walked off the set of a photo shoot for a Gap magazine spread. The mother, a few years younger than myself, squeezes her stroller in, while her little tyke buzzes his lips and wiggles his index finger up and down them. Then he squeaks with excitement at his new discovery. The flawless father figure has his daughter perched up on his broad shoulders. She rests her chin on top of his dark gelled hair and proudly wraps her arms around his neck.

“Are they twins?” Morgan asks the mother.

“As a matter of fact, they are. You are one smart little girl.”

I smile at this family, remembering what it was like when Paul and I were so absorbed in Morgan and her every milestone. We, too, would make a daily walk to the park. Morgan would sandwich herself between us, grabbing a Mommy hand and a Daddy hand. She would pick her feet up, swinging forward with our long strides.



Before I know it, we exit the empty, hollow lobby and make our way onto the sidewalk, flowing into the noise of moving feet and honking cars. Morgan and I are a few steps behind Mr. and Mrs. Perfection. We catch up when we hit the “DON’T WALK” signal at the intersection. Morgan hits the button on the light pole intended to speed up the waiting process. She must have the magic touch, because a flashy “WALK” pops up. She reaches for my hand, an instinct I would have forgotten if it weren’t for her street smarts. I am amazed with the confidence that Morgan reflects onto the uneasiness of the city.

I keep my eyes from wandering to the window displays as we pass Fendi, BCBG Max Azria, and Dolce & Gabbana. This is long overdue quality time I must spend with my daughter and I won’t let a little fall fashion take away my focus.

“Whoa!” I am forced to stop in mid-step when Morgan, still holding my hand, plants her feet.

“Wait a minute, Mommy.”

Morgan is staring at a homeless man. He looks to be in his late sixties. His hair and beard are untamed and gray. This elderly man is camouflaged among a dozen intense checkers matches. The majority of the players appear to be poverty-stricken as well, but not all of them. Some middle-class men and women have stopped to watch or jump in on a game. Some players are young adults with the name of a local college printed across their hooded sweatshirts.

Giant wooden spools are painted on top with faded red and black squares. The old man raises his hand to move one of the painted beer cap pieces. He wears one

gardening glove with the tips cutoff. He jumps one of his opponent's caps and adds it to his pile.

Raggedy clothes that Goodwill wouldn't even accept cover his stick-thin body. He wears a plaid flannel shirt with a few missing buttons. It closely resembles the fabric of a Woolrich picnic blanket I received as a wedding gift. If I were to glance at his jeans alone, I would assume him to be a young boy. The whitewash color is coated in grass stains and dirt. A filthy pair of socks cover his toes, which poke out of the holes at the tips of his too-small tennis shoes.

He blends in with the scenery. I didn't notice him before, not in the least bit. I tighten my grip on Morgan and tug her towards the park. She ignores my gesture and holds out the brown paper sack. Before I can intervene she is taking one step closer.

"Here ya go, Ralph. I know it isn't moldy cheese, but I figured you would be hungry."

He accepts the grilled cheese sandwich, showing his appreciation through a brown-tinted grin. As he opens the sack, I am wondering why this simple movement looks so strange. It is then that I notice his that he only has one arm. I also notice the shine of a military service metal, neatly pinned on his shirt.

Morgan leans back towards me, ready to continue on our journey. My teeth clench my lower lip as I fight off the tears I feel brewing inside me.

"Honey, I'm sorry I didn't believe you about Ralph. You know, you really shouldn't talk to strangers. Let's hurry along to the park before it gets dark."

“It’s okay, Mommy, but Ralph isn’t a stranger. Harriet and me play checkers here sometimes on the way to the park. A couple times we brought some food here for people Harriet called her old friends. Will you do hopscotch with me?”

“You bet.”

\* \* \*

We take turns hopping with our legs together and then apart. I don’t care how childish I look bouncing around. Strands of my hair wiggle out of my ponytail, resting in messy pieces that outline my face. The bottom hem on the back of my pants gets dirty, yet this does not faze me. Morgan counts to ten, reaches the end of the square design, and then races back towards me. Her arms cling around my outer thighs. I don’t remember the last time I felt this happy. I crouch down, face-to-face with my sweet, little girl.

“Now let’s get going. I know just the perfect pair of shoes we must pick up at a shop down the street on our way home. Your friend would look great in them.”