

## 9½ Narrow Excerpt

### Chapter One

#### WHITE MARY JANES

It was the summer of '61. Kennedy was in the White House, I was in church, and Hannah Howard was in a pair of white Mary Janes. Hannah was the prettiest girl in my school. She had long platinum hair, bright blue eyes, and a Hollywood pedigree, a rarity in Andover, Massachusetts, where Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, was the town's biggest celebrity. Hannah's mother was Priscilla Lane, who had starred in dozens of movies, including *The Roaring Twenties*, with James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, and *Arsenic and Old Lace*, with Cary Grant. Priscilla Lane, by then Mrs. Howard, had also been my Brownie leader and looked so striking in her uniform that I never missed a troop meeting and briefly considered a military career.

Whenever Hannah and Mrs. Howard walked up to the Communion rail even the most devout churchgoers put down their missals and gawked. I was among the worst offenders. On that particular Sunday, I kept staring at their outfits as I inched my way toward the altar rail. They were in the line opposite me so I had an especially good view. Suddenly I felt a sharp poke in my back. It was my mother, and I knew exactly what that poke meant: You stop right now! You're in church! But I couldn't stop because I'd already fallen in love with Hannah's white Mary Janes.

In hindsight, I realize I was infatuated not so much with the shoes but with the concept of Hollywood perfection viewed through the eyes of a ten-year old. Though my mother was blonde and very pretty, she wasn't a movie star, and nobody would ever mistake me for a movie star's daughter. Instead of long platinum hair, I had a brunette pixie cut that clung to my head like an upside down artichoke, and I was tall, skinny and so pale my mother kept pressing me to "get some color." When the neighborhood kids played Cowboys and Indians, I was usually cast as "the English Princess," whose sole responsibilities included sitting in a claustrophobic teepee waiting for the cowboys to rescue me. Usually they were too busy shooting toy guns and shouting racist comments at the Indians to remember they'd left "Princess Pale Skin" behind.

I couldn't imagine Hannah wasting her precious youth in an overheated teepee. She was probably a regular at Disneyland, where her family received preferential treatment through her mother's Hollywood connections. I knew that envy was a sin, but I wanted to be Hannah Howard. I immediately felt guilty for not thinking more spiritual thoughts, especially with Father Smith holding the Host in front of my face. As I returned to my pew, I tried to extricate the sticky wafer from the roof of my mouth, while praying to be a better person. It was then I experienced an epiphany. While it wasn't spiritual or particularly profound, it resonated with me. I couldn't walk in Hannah's shoes, but I could, if my mother agreed, own the same pair.

"White shoes?" my mother said as we drove home from church. "Are you crazy? They're going to get filthy and then what will you do?"

"Clean them."

"They'll never look the same. You've had some crazy ideas but white shoes, well, that's the craziest. Just you wait. Your father is going to have plenty to say about that."

My father worked in finance, first as a bank examiner, and then in the mortgage department at the Arlington Trust Company, where everybody said he was the nicest man they'd ever met. Despite his outgoing personality during business hours, he was a naturally reticent man, who treasured his brief moments of privacy. One of his greatest pleasures was reading the Boston Globe and Lawrence Eagle-Tribune, which he'd focus on so intensely he seemed to go into a trance. His mother died when he was four, and since my grandfather, who worked for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, couldn't take care of seven children, the family was split up. Depending on their ages, some stayed with relatives or were sent away to school. My father and his older brother, Joe, wound up with their aunt, a Dominican nun, who lived in a nearby convent. When they turned seven, they attended a strict all-boys Catholic school, where they joined other students who'd been orphaned or whose parents couldn't keep them at home. As a form of survival, my father had learned from an early age that books and newspapers were powerful tools of escape. Raised not to whine or complain, he was stoic to a fault. If anyone ever asked how he was, he'd always give the same answer: "I'm fine."

I knew he wasn't going to have "plenty" to say about my Mary Janes because he wouldn't waste a syllable on anything as trivial as fashion. This was strictly a mother-daughter issue. My mother told me I had enough shoes, and that I was turning into a very greedy little girl and you know what happens to greedy little girls?

While she painted a very dark picture of my future, we noticed a skunk in our backyard. It had built a den not far from where we played croquet, preventing us from channeling our frustrations through competitive sport. For the next several days, my mother rapped on the kitchen window and screamed, "Get out, you pest!" Sensing no danger whatsoever, the skunk continued to ignore her, and because my mother was afraid it would soon take over the house – she tended to endow animals with human qualities – she called the Andover Police. In all fairness, she hadn't expected a firing squad. The policemen explained that skunks are rarely seen in daylight during the summer, unless they have rabies. The skunk had to go. To this day, I can still hear them shouting, "Ready! Aim! Fire!" It was not a clean kill. The skunk staggered around our croquet set, before collapsing, dead, over a wicket.

I became hysterical and to calm me down, my mother offered to buy me a Popsicle. "I just saw an animal being killed before my very eyes," I cried. "You think a Popsicle is going to make that image go away?"

"Then what would?"

I pretended to think for a few seconds. "Hmmm," I said. "White Mary Janes?"

A few hours later, with my new shoes and a celebratory Popsicle, my mother told me I should be grateful to the skunk, whose death had not been in vain, though the animal did blanket the neighborhood with a noxious odor. It was a small price to pay for such beautiful shoes. As I was admiring the way the white leather blended seamlessly with my white legs, my mother casually dropped a bombshell: "You were born with twelve toes, you know." Before I had time to process this bizarre piece of information she ran into the kitchen to answer the telephone. The street was abuzz with rumors that she'd killed someone.

Twelve toes? Where did that come from? While I could understand her calling me the prettiest baby in the hospital nursery – except for boy with an unusually large head, I was the only baby – but twelve toes? That’s not something mothers usually brag about unless they live in parts of Asia, where extra digits are considered good luck, but in Andover, twelve toes aren’t necessarily bad luck. They’re just not a big advantage.

Simple things like nursery rhymes suddenly become darker and more complex. What’s a mother to do after the fifth little piggy goes “wee wee wee” all the way home, and she’s stuck with a sixth little piggy? Does she send it off to market again? Pretend it’s a Siamese twin? And what happens when the baby gets older and learns that  $5+1$  doesn’t equal  $5\frac{1}{2}$ , or, if the mother is in total denial, five?

I came home from the hospital minus two, so I was spared the math problems, but the story, as I soon discovered, didn’t add up.

“So, about those twelve toes,” I said when she returned from explaining to the elderly woman next door why her rhubarb smelled “off.”

“What are you talking about?” my mother replied. “I never said you had twelve toes. What I said, if you’d listened carefully, is that you were born with jaundice.”

My mother was a master at blurting out things and then developing temporary amnesia.

I was pretty sure that I hadn’t confused a condition that causes yellow skin with a birth defect that results in extra digits. Even if my mother had used the medical term for jaundice, which is “icteris,” it still sounded nothing like “twelve toes.” I took a closer look at my little toes. Why did they have identical scars? “Corns,” my mother said. “We all get them.” But babies don’t walk far enough to develop corns. They take a few steps and then go “boom” to the kind of wild applause they’ll probably never hear again in their entire lives.

The sudden revelation of my missing toes brought out the inner detective in me. I was a major fan of Nancy Drew books, which my mother bought for me the minute a new one came out. My mother read them too, though she made me promise never to tell anyone. “I’m just a kid at heart,” she’d say.

Whenever my mother slathered herself with baby oil and went outside to “work” on her tan – most women in our neighborhood treated tanning as an actual job – I attempted to solve The Mystery of the Twelve Toes. My first stop was the family photo album, which my father had started when I was born and kept up regularly throughout the years. It sat on the bottom shelf of the living room bookcase, wedged between Ernie Pyle’s Here Is Your War and Alexandre Dumas’ The Count of Monte Crisco.

With an old magnifying glass I’d discovered in the basement, I immediately struck gold. A photo marked “First Day Home From Hospital” showed me kicking up my bare feet on my parent’s bed. My mother’s index finger extended into the frame, pointing at my left little toe. Using the magnifying glass, I began counting. One, two, three ... ten. If two were removed, why didn’t I have bandages? And who cut off the toes? The obstetrician? A nearsighted mohel?

Right then, I had an image of dancing feet, and I recalled with some repulsion Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale, The Red Shoes. It’s the story of a little girl who receives a

pair of beautiful red dancing slippers that she can't stop thinking about even during church service. The shoes eventually take over her life, forcing her to dance until her feet bleed. She can't remove them, so she visits the local executioner and asks him to chop off her feet.

"You cried when you read that," my mother recalled when I reminded her of the story. A gigantic cumulus cloud had settled over the backyard, and she'd come indoors for some iced tea and to check on the progress of her "color."

"Gee, I wonder why?" I said. "The girl winds up with two stumps for feet and then dies in the end."

"But she goes to heaven."

"So you think I'm like that vain little girl and as punishment I imagined that someone chopped off my toes."

"I'm not saying that exactly. But didn't this toe obsession of yours start with those white Mary Janes?"

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