

1941

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Recommended Citation

Mayberry, Eff V.. "White Tassels on Her Shoes." *New Mexico Quarterly* 11, 1 (1941). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol11/iss1/10>

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WHITE TASSELS ON HER SHOES

Eff V. Mayberry

THE ATTIC bedroom, so long and barny that it took up the whole second story of the house, was Sister's first stop on her nightly tour of inspection. She was there now and, as always, she gazed with fascinated eyes at the breath-divider. It was a sheet of glass about a foot square clamped to the bed's headboard and marked a thin, transparent division between the two pillows. Her plump stepuncle had invented it to keep his breath from mingling with his skinny brother Paul's. Quietly, so as not to creak the bedsprings and bring an adult reprimand, she crawled up on the smooth counterpane. Then she cautiously pinched her nose with her thumb and forefinger, to check a dangerous insucking of air, and squinted at the glass. Not a germ could she see, not one. But if Uncle Erasmus were right—and he was a druggist, he certainly ought to know—millions of the nasty little things swarmed on the breath-divider, staying there instead of changing places in the two sets of stepuncle lungs.

Tiring of this, she sidled off the bed, smoothed the spread, and went to the dresser to see if Uncle Paul had a new girl friend. But no, the same photographs tilted against the mirror. Laura and Edrie and Pat.

On careful tiptoe, she proceeded to the waste basket and fumbled through it. One, two, and down at the bottom was a third—she had three cigarette coupons to add to her collection that she kept hidden in a cigar box under her davenport bed in the living room.

At last she left the attic and slipped down the short staircase to the main hallway. Maybe Joey, the streetcar conductor who slept in the dining room that was now a bedroom, was still talking in the kitchen or out on a date. Sometimes he left on his dresser a little pile of slugs that people tried to pass off as nickels. Joey had told her to take them; they were for her to play store with. This would be her last visit for the night. She had already been in the back bedroom, behind the kitchen, where they all ate. Fred lived there and he worked in a grocery store. Quite often he brought home teensy-weensy samples that looked just

like the big groceries. She used them in her store where she both bought and sold with the slugs.

She listened at Joey's door before entering, because Mama had told her not to burst in suddenly in case the men were dressing. She was very particular about this, so there wouldn't be any trouble. For her stepfather didn't want her to go in the rooms at all; he said it was a wonder they could keep the boarders, the way that damned kid kept snoop-ing around. But she explored anyway because Mama and the boarders didn't seem to mind. Besides, it was her Mama's boarding house, wasn't it, Mama did all the work, and Sister never touched anything other than what the men said she could. Just looking with eyes didn't muss up the rooms, and it was amazing what interesting things a grown-up man boarder could collect. Like the English magazines with the funny pictures that Joey, who used to live in London, always bought. Uncle Paul's girl friends, Uncle Erasmus' inventions, and Fred's moving picture actresses that he pinned all around his walls. The rooms, and the rare trips downtown and to Golden Gate Park with Mama were the only excitements in the life of a five-year-old girl who wasn't allowed to play on San Francisco's busy streets.

Of course, downtown and Golden Gate Park were the best of all. She would give up all her collections just for them. Because they were synonymous with her white tasseled shoes. Those beautiful, expensive, extraordinary shoes that were only worn on special occasions! Her stomach, even now when she was standing quite ordinarily in the hall, not going anywhere at all, had an ecstatic crawly sensation as she thought of those tassels. Wonderful, fluffy things of white silk dangling at the top of white leather shoes. She remembered how they jounced against her legs, so gayly that she had to skip, so softly that it was like the touch of a fairy. Magic shoes, Sister pretended. Whoever wore them had a fairy power—so strong she could do anything, so lightfooted she never got tired. And they were rich shoes, too. Mama had paid eight dollars for them, and her stepfather had grown red in the face and just hollered when he found the sales tag. But Mama had hollered back and said her own feet hurt so bad she couldn't bear to let Sister have anything but the very best, daintiest shoes, and *My God, I do enough work to have eight dollars for my kid, I stand on my feet from six in the morning 'til midnight, I've got corns now, I never had a corn before I married you and you brought me to this boarding house for a honeymoon. Honeymoon! With you and four boarders! You thought you slipped one over*

on me, didn't you? Well, I'll tell you why I took it. For Sister. I didn't want her dependent on you and that damned salary you're so careful with, you can put the whole thing in the bank for all I care. But I'm telling you once and for all, I'll spend eight dollars on my kid's feet if I want to!

After that, every time her stepfather saw the shoes on Sister he snorted so hard through his nose that the end of it quivered. But he didn't dare say anything about them. That was one of the reasons why Sister pretended the shoes were magic.

She turned Joey's doorknob cautiously, ready to smile politely if Joey were really inside. As she did so, a turgid undertone that she had heard all the time but had ignored because it kept going so steadily, without silence to give it emphasis, exploded into high, sharp voices in the living room. She shut Joey's door without going inside and listened, bright-eyed and still. Mama and her stepfather were fighting again. A semi-hysterical shiver broke her tenseness as she wondered if they would start slapping each other as they had one night when Mama turned on the gas heater because Sister was cold, and her stepfather turned it off because it ran the gas bill up.

"I'm sick and tired of your stinginess and all this work!" she heard Mama yell. "It would be all right if you were out of work, but you're not, you've got a good job! All you married me for was to make money. Don't you dare deny it! I heard Paul and Erasmus talking tonight in the kitchen; they didn't know I was in the pantry. Paul said you'd bragged you'd make this marriage pay and he guessed you'd done it. Well, I'm through! You can wash the dishes and cook and sweep and make beds yourself!"

"What about all this furniture?" This was her stepfather. "We got to pay for that, ain't we? My God, my salary won't pay for all this! If you was a regular woman, a help-meet—"

"Did I buy this furniture? No! You had it all sitting here when I came to this house, even with a bedroom set stuck in the dining room for an extra boarder! Did I buy it?" Her voice went up and up, and shattered as its pressure grew too much for its altitude.

A door slammed. A key turned. Sister knew Mama had left the living room and locked herself in the front bedroom. Another slam, and Sister saw her big stepfather stomping down the long hall toward the kitchen, steadily approaching the very spot where she stood. She edged into a corner under the stairway, flattened her tiny body against

the red-papered wall. But her filmy blonde hair entangled the light from the dim hall bulb and haloed the solemn white face. Her stepfather saw her.

"What you doin'?" he demanded. "Rummagin' around again? My God, all I have to put up with!"

He swung open the kitchen door. She saw all the boarders briefly etched in the blue haze of cigarette and cigar smoke as they sat around the cleared-off supper table. Words trailed half-spoken from their lips as they looked at the entrant. Uncle Paul put on his sarcastic grin. Uncle Erasmus looked smooth and blinky-eyed and knowing. Fred had a desperately curious expression. Only Joey was unchanged. Joey always seemed the same. Mama said the English were like that.

Her stepfather threw out his arms in an irritable gesture. Black hair stood up in a light filtered mat on the backs of his hands. It made Sister think fearfully that perhaps stepfather was part animal and some day when he got mad he might growl and start biting people. "Hattie's on a high horse again!" he snapped. He always went to the boarders for sympathy; he'd known all of them long before he even met Mama. "These women that think they're queens! Here, I try and try—" The bang of the door cut his voice short.

Sister ran into the living room and tried to peek through the keyhole into Mama's bedroom. A key was in it. She heard a muffled sob. Suddenly her world lost its props and staggered down upon her. Mama crying! Mama never cried. Mama got mad, and sometimes she swore, and she flung up her head and stormed out of rooms, and slammed pots and pans in the sink. But in all her life, Sister had never seen Mama cry or even look like she wanted to cry. It was just one of those things that would never happen.

Only, it had. Mama was sobbing and sobbing. Strangling as though she couldn't get her breath. Choking, hard, steady, underscored by the plud-plud of a pillow being beaten by a fist.

"Mama!" she half whispered. No answer. "Mama!" she called, loud and terrified.

The sobs gathered into a deep gulp. The bed creaked. Feet stumbled across the room and the key turned. Mama stood in the doorway, her face puffy and her nose a scalded red like her hands always were from being in dishwater so much.

She didn't speak to Sister, only turned and flung herself full length

on the bed again. Sister carefully closed the door, veered to the bed end, and peeped at her mother through its enameled bars.

"Mama, you're crying," she finally stated in a little, lost voice.

"Damn him! Damn him!" Mama gasped, and kept on crying.

Sister edged herself on the bed and sat on her knees like an Oriental figurine. Her wisps of fingers laced in and out. She didn't know what to do. This was virgin tragedy. Then she remembered what Mama did when *she* cried. She lifted Sister to her lap, laughed at her, and cuddled her. But Mama was too big to hold. And Sister didn't feel like laughing; she was almost afraid to speak for fear she would cry too. As a last resort she stretched out her hand and mechanically patted Mama's back for the cuddling part. Mama turned on her side and squeezed Sister's small body against her warm, trembling one. Her eyes were swollen almost shut and even the eyeballs were red.

"Listen, Sister," she said, muffled and wet-sounding. "We're going to leave here tonight. I can't stand it any more. You and I are going away, I don't know where, but anywhere's better. We'll pack up and get out."

Sister jumped off the bed, excited, shivering with the newness of this experience, glad to get away from her cross, hairy stepfather. "I'll pack my own things!" she offered. "I'll fold 'em smooth as anything."

The idea went deep into her. Little bonds of fear, of always anticipating trouble, of feeling confusingly guilty when her stepfather looked at her, began to loosen. She shook them off, and stepped out, free and joyous. They—she and Mama—would do as they pleased. No work, all the rummaging they wanted, all the beautiful collecting of things that would otherwise be lost, no yelling about expensive shoes.

"Mama!" she shrieked, remembering, delighted. "This is special, it's dress-up, ain't it? I can wear my tasseled shoes, can't I, Mama?"

A faint "Yes" reassured her. She scampered to the closet, sat spraddle-legged on the floor, and untied her brown oxfords. Slowly, reverently, she pulled on one white shoe, the tassel flipping against her hand and tickling her into a heady pride. As her heel slipped in, she saw that her sock was stained brown from her everyday shoes. Fastidiously she removed the shoe, yanked off her socks, ran to the dresser and found a clean pair. She looked in the pin tray for the button hook. She couldn't find it, so she picked up one of Mama's big hairpins. Back in the closet, she put on the white shoes, clumsily worked the hairpin in and out of the holes, and pulled through the pearly buttons.

She stood up, squinched her toes under the leather. She twisted her legs this way and that, savoring the flirting of the tassels. Then she dragged a chair to the closet and climbed on it to pull her dresses from the hangers. Usually she was afraid to stand on tiptoe so high above the floor, but not tonight. Not in her *magic* shoes. A little girl could never fall as long as she had them on. They made her strong as—strong as—a bubbly moan came from the bed, re-laving Sister with misery and shock, washing rage to the surface—they made her strong enough even to fight her stepfather! She'd show him not to pick on Mama! She'd show the mean fat old thing that Mama had someone to fight for her!

Her body felt goose-pimples, but her head was hot. Her heart pounded, and she seemed to swell with a weight of tears that would not come out. Dizzily she squatted on her haunches and stroked her shoes. "You'll help me! You'll be magic!" she whispered fiercely.

Like a taunting echo, a wall-thickened clap of men's laughter came from the kitchen. Her stepfather was in there telling the boarders about Mama, making them *laugh* at Mama! Poking fun at her because he had been able to make her cry for the first time in her life!

Sister jumped to the floor, took one last desperate glance at Mama, and sped out the door, through the living room, into the hall. Yes, they were laughing. Not a tickled laugh. A making-fun laugh. She clenched her hands furiously, longing for Mama to jump up from the bed, not crying any more, and go with her to help give them all a whipping. But Mama didn't come and Sister's eyes began to stream too until the red-walled hall seemed to wave and run its sides together, defying her to open the kitchen door. It leered and mocked in warning as to how those big men would act when they saw Sister—her stepfather who was always mad at her for no reason at all, those boarders who really belonged to her stepfather because he had known them so long. For an instant she had a panicky, heartbroken knowledge of just how small she really was.

Her feet seemed frozen to the floor, afraid. She sniffed hard with her nose because she didn't have a hanky and she was so watery. "Maybe, maybe we'll just run away," she thought.

Her mother's name, "Hattie," rose above the rest of the talk in the kitchen. A rumble of words followed. The men laughed, broken and choppy, some enjoying themselves more than others. Her rage mounted again. She danced with the hurting bigness of it, and flip! flip! went the white tassels, powerful, beautiful, rich white tassels.

In an instant she had the kitchen door flung open. The blue smoke drifted back with the onrush of fresh air, and she could see them all clearly, their monstrous size towering above her. Her stepfather sat in the middle of their grouped chairs, a big cigar in his mouth. He had the proud silly look of a puppy who has been made much of. He grinned. All of them grinned, except Joey. But he watched everything so carefully, not missing anything, absorbing the grins by not throwing them away, that she hated him too.

With conscientious distribution of her fury, she stood before each man and stamped her foot. Not until she had made the rounds did she speak. "You stop it!" she squealed, then. "You're bad, nasty men and you laughed at Mama. If you do it again, I'll—I'll kill you dead!"

A vast roar of amusement filled the kitchen. She swam in it, blinded, choking, until she could scarcely make out which figure was her stepfather. She stumbled to one, but it was not fat enough. It was Uncle Erasmus, and he and Uncle Paul had their faces right together, laughing and jabbering to each other.

"Goody, goody!" she screamed. "You ain't got your ole breath-divider, and you're breathing each other! I hope you get a hundred million germs and get sick with spots all over you!"

She whirled toward her stepfather and stamped her feet in a vicious rat-tat-tat. "I hate you, hate you, hate you!" she sobbed. "You made my Mama cry!" She doubled up a nubbin of a fist and struck his fat thigh, her mind swooning with the fierce thrill of fighting to the death.

But her stepfather didn't hit back. "Like wildcat, like kitten, shows how she's been brought up!" he shouted. His laughter had the raspy sound of tearing paper.

"I'm gonna fight you!" she warned.

The kitchen fairly rocked. Even Joey looked bright-eyed. Gurgles and snorts and guffaws pelted her like rocks and drove her from the scene of battle. She burned with shame for Mama and herself, writhed under the lashing merriment, helpless, defeated. Jerking with sobs, she backed out, not wanting to appear to run away. At the threshold she stiffened for a final thrust. "Don't you dare give me nothing again! I'm gonna throw your ole coupons 'n slugs 'n groceries in the garbage!"

Down the hall she backed, glowering at her smoke- and tear-filmed taunters. One of them shut the door. She checked her stumbling retreat and furiously swiped her eyes with her short skirt. She went into the bedroom. Mama's face was still squashed against the pillow. Her opened purse lay on the table beside the bed.

She turned her face sidewise and sat up. "Poor baby, you've been crying. It's a shame to get you so upset," she said. Sister knew from Mama's saggy, blank expression that she hadn't heard her fight with the men. Not even the laughing, maybe. A person couldn't hear much, crying in a pillow.

"I ain't—ain't upset," Sister lied. "Are you packed yet, Mama?"

Mama jounced some coins in her hand. "N-n-o," she answered slowly. "No. Listen, Sister, I've only got four dollars and a half; that won't take us very far. And I won't ask *him* for a penny! It's night, we'd have to go to a hotel. I ought to find a job before we go, Sister, so we'd be safe and sure; a little girl has to have things safe and sure."

Sister's lips twisted. The laughter still hung in her ears, roaring, mocking. "Please let's go, Mamal!" she begged. "I hate him, I hate all of 'em!"

"We will," Mama promised, but her tones dragged against each other, hopeless, tired. "Only, not at night, with just four dollars and a half. I need more, I need something definite to go to. I've got to be sensible." She half turned her head to look at the two pillows, plopped against each other, one of them with grayish wet patches. She had a funny expression. Ashamed, it seemed to Sister. And as though her stomach might be sick. "I've got to be sensible," she repeated.

Despair tightened on Sister until she was wrung dry of everything—of tears, of living, of hope, of ever being happy again. She was as forlorn and empty as a mouse-eaten seed pod. Not belonging in this house, or being wanted by this house, or wanting to be wanted. Yet having to stay because Mama and she were so helpless. She wondered if this dreadful feeling was what being sensible meant.

"What's being sensible?" she asked.

"It's looking things straight in the face, not getting wild ideas," Mama replied. "You'd better get undressed now; I'll make up your bed." She went into the living room.

Sister walked to the closet, sat down, and struggled with the buttons on her shoes. The silky tassels snagged against her fingers, caressing them, like stroked cat's fur. She looked down at them. Her eyes blurred, but her glance did not waver.

"You ain't magic atall! You ain't nothing but ole eight dollar shoes and Mama's only got four dollars and a half," she muttered thickly. A tear trembled on her upper lip and her tongue licked it away. "I got to be sensible," she went on hardily; "I got to look you straight in the face."